

A Tranquil Star: Unpublished Short Stories of Primo Levi

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A Tranquil Star, the first new American collection of Primo Levi previously untranslated fiction to appear since 1990, affirms his position as one of the twentieth century's most enduring writers.

These seventeen stories, first published in Italian between 1949 and 1986, demonstrate Levi's extraordinary range, taking the reader from the primal resistance of a captured partisan fighter to a middle-aged chemist experimenting with a new paint that wards off evil, to the lustful thoughts of an older man obsessed with a mysterious woman in a seaside villa. In the title story, Levi demonstrates his unerringly tragic understanding of the fragility of the universe through the tale of a pensive astronomer, terrified by the possibility that a long-dormant star might explode and reduce the entire planet to vapor. This remarkable new collection affirms Italo Calvino's conviction that Levi was "one of the most important and gifted writers of our time."

Primo Levi

(1919-1987) was an Italian chemist and writer, best known for his memoirs *If This Is a Man* and *The Periodic Table*.

Ann Goldstein

, the editor of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* and the award-winning translator of Elena Ferrante's novels, is a former editor at *The New Yorker*.

Alessandra Bastagli is the translator of Primo Levi's stories in *A Tranquil Star* and his essays in *The Complete Works*. She lives in New York.

Primo Levi, the Italian Jewish chemist and writer who died 20 years ago, is best known for his 1959 memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*. But this new collection of stories -- all previously unpublished in English -- will surely surprise readers familiar with Levi as a "Holocaust writer" or even those who know the semi-autobiographical stories in *The Periodic Table*. *A Tranquil Star* is a cabinet of curiosities, in which the realistic pieces are ordinary compared to the array of fascinating items Levi has culled from his imagination of worlds beyond our own. In "Bureau of Vital Statistics," for instance, a frustrated man reports to his office for what appears to be an ordinary clerical position, until we slowly realize that his job is to assign causes of death to people on Earth. In "Gladiators," a woman reluctantly agrees to join her boyfriend at a popular sporting event -- where the "sport" consists of pedestrians dueling against cars. "Knall" describes a consumer craze for a pocket-sized gadget that instantly and silently murders people, but only at point-blank range.

Each of these stories is only a few pages long, and perhaps it's best to reveal as little about them as possible, so as not to ruin the reader's delight upon discovering the moment when the surreal finally saturates the real.

For another writer, this sort of "punch line" approach to plot might become little more than a gimmick. But the cumulative effect of these stories -- each written in the same elegant, unpretentious prose that defined Levi's memoirs -- is to make one wonder about the

prevailing philosophy that brought these many imagined worlds into a single mind. And as one reads, that philosophy becomes clear. In each story we are introduced to a twist on our world that is, on closer examination, not really a twist at all. The shocking elements of these stories are precisely the points where they correspond to our own world: the sick spectacle that we make of brutal violence, the casual possibility of murder based on whim, the systems of terror and war that knowingly set the causes of others' deaths.

As a collection of nearly all of Levi's previously untranslated fiction, this book does include the occasional tale in which inanity trumps insight.

But the most poignant stories here are those that deal with the act of writing itself, and in particular its failure to meet the expectation of immortality. As the narrator relates in "The Fugitive," about a poem that physically eludes its author's grasp, "To compose a poem that is worth reading and remembering is a gift of destiny: it happens to only a few people, without regard for rules or intentions, and to them it happens only a few times in their lives." Levi has been granted this gift of destiny, and American readers now have the gift of rediscovering it.

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