



Prisoner of Love

Jean Genet, Barbara Bray (Translator), Ahdaf Soueif (Introduction)

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Starting in 1970, Jean Genet—petty thief, prostitute, modernist master—spent two years in the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. Always an outcast himself, Genet was drawn to this displaced people, an attraction that was to prove as complicated for him as it was enduring. *Prisoner of Love*, written some ten years later, when many of the men Genet had known had been killed, and he himself was dying, is a beautifully observed description of that time and those men as well as a reaffirmation of the author's commitment not only to the Palestinian revolution but to rebellion itself. For Genet's most overtly political book is also his most personal—the last step in the unrepentantly sacrilegious pilgrimage first recorded in *The Thief's Journal*, and a searching meditation, packed with visions, ruses, and contradictions, on such life-and-death issues as the politics of the image and the seductive and treacherous character of identity. Genet's final masterpiece is a lyrical and philosophical voyage to the bloody intersection of oppression, terror, and desire at the heart of the contemporary world.

Prisoner of Love Details

Date : Published January 31st 2003 by NYRB Classics (first published 1982)

ISBN : 9781590170281

Author : Jean Genet , Barbara Bray (Translator) , Ahdaf Soueif (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 430 pages

Genre : Cultural, France, Nonfiction, Glbt, Queer

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From Reader Review Prisoner of Love for online ebook

Nour says

Finally finished. This book was a journey for me. Oftentimes I would set it aside knowing that I am not ready to grasp the enormity of Jean Genet's writing. Not quite a memoir, Genet delves into an exquisite portrayal of his lived experience among Palestinian revolutionaries. There's a sense of hurry in the book, and considering Genet was himself dying, perhaps the hurried portrait that Genet paints is reflected in his writing as one memory bounces off of the next. It may have taken me a year to read, but definitely worth it.

Tony says

In 1970, Jean Genet, armed with a letter of safe transit from Arafat himself, visited the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. He stayed two years. He left in a hurry, but returned in 1984. It was then he started to write this, this, this.....what is this? It is not a fiction, certainly not a novel. It's not a history; I had to look elsewhere for chronology and facts. It's not an argument; he damns everyone. At times it read like a *billet-doux*, but the subject of his ardor will never get to read it. It's self-indulgent enough to be memoir-ish, I suppose, but surely there's a better category. Maybe, oh, how about 'experimental journalism'? How Sean Penn!

That's actually not an unfair comparison. There's plenty of self-indulgence. I mean, he keeps asking rhetorically why he went there. Yet easily half the book is about how beautiful he finds the young fedayeen, with special emphasis on the eroticism of their thighs. He proudly proclaims, "I'm a pederast!" And he keeps detailing his time with the Black Panthers, trying I'm sure to draw some parallel, but nevertheless describing in detail the conspicuous bulge in a Panther's pants.*

We get it, Jean. And we also get that you want to rub your finger in the reader's eye.

That said, sometimes we all need a finger in the eye. Or, as Genet put it, sometimes "a touch of garlic helps."

Of course, you may miss the poetry if you've taken sides:

The State of Israel is a bruise, a contusion that lingers on the shoulder of Islam ...

Or you might think he just wanted to start a fight:

*If you're against Israel you're not an enemy or an opponent--you're a terrorist.***

Or this, showing his cynicism isn't one-sided:

"How did a family get to be a Leading Family?"

"By genuinely descending from Ali, or by being clever enough to make people think so. Do you think Europe has a monopoly in sham genealogies?"

"So it's not certain your descent is legitimate?"

"Oh, Monsieur Genet--fancy you talking to me about legitimacy! Who dare say any man's mother was faithful to her husband?"

His look-around was not without historical lesson:

Right back as far as you can go there were alliances with Crusaders; new kings; brigands among the younger sons of the minor nobility; improper solicitation of legacies; brutal plunder legalized by forged seals of golden or bull's-blood wax. As for the Crusaders themselves, they created new sovereigns. overlords and privileges; they married the daughters of descendants of the prophet, inherited the wealth of Byzantium, tolerated slavery under the Ottomans.

So why *did* he go there? Maybe it was sex, or some other adventurous gene. Perhaps we should take him at his suggestion, that he, a rebel, needs to champion other rebels, black or Palestinian.

I know this: this very imperfect book will stay with me for a long, long time.

*An annoyance: in describing the nature of race relations in America, Genet insists on talking about 'The Blacks'. How Donald Trump! Although, of course, Genet wouldn't see that. But -- wait, where's my soapbox? -- to me, if you refer to any group, and maybe especially African-Americans, as THE _____, then it sounds like something you might want to put a fence around.

**He says more provocative things, which I won't quote here. But he talks about Chatila (sp) with a profound sadness, so you get the point.

Tosh says

Jean Genet's last book and in some ways his most passionate one. His love for the Black Panthers and the Palestines goes beyond politics into something sexual and quite dangerous. Maybe my favorite of his books. Genet was one of a kind - one can't even out do him with the mixture of passion, sexuality and the joy of being in the wrong place at the right time.

arnulfo. says

this is some dense reading. will tackle later. damn you genet.

Bettina says

brought to this book by the review by Ahdaf Soueif in Mezzaterra, now reading it slowly bit by bit, very interesting reflections on a period that is past but of course very important for our present. descriptions of his conversations with Palestinians in refugee camps, fedayeen in different places, written some 20 years after the events.

Tasos says

Με παραπλ?νησε ο τ?τλος και ν?μιζα πως θα ε?ναι ?λλο ?να queer μανιφ?στο του συγγραφ?α, εδ? ?μως πρ?κειται για ?να χρονικ? της δι?νεξης Ισρα?λ-Παλαιστ?νης ?πως την ?ζησε ο Genet κατ? τις επισκ?ψεις του στην περιοχ? σε δι?ρκεια 15 χρ?νων. Για ?ποιον δε γνωρ?ζει τις ιστορικ?ς λεπτομ?ρειες (?πως εγ?) η αν?γνωση ε?ναι γολγοθ?ς, αφο? η αφ?γηση κ?θε ?λλο παρ? ιστορικ? και γραμμικ? ε?ναι. ?να συνονθ?λευμα τ?πων, προσ?πων και γεγον?των μ?σα απ? μια αμιγ?ς προσωπικ? γραφ?, ?πως τη διαμορφ?νει η μν?μη χρ?νια μετ?, για ?να κρ?τος κι ?ναν λα? που, ?πως κι ο συγγραφ?ας, π?λευναν απελπισμ?να για μια θ?ση στον κ?σμο. Ο Genet π?θανε πριν το ολοκληρ?σει, γεγον?ς κ?πως ειρωνικ? αν σκεφτε? κανε?ς της πορε?α της παλαιστινιακ?ς επαν?στασης.

Kathleen says

WOW. Really good. Hard to read though; i put it down several months ago and haven't picked it up since; i will at some point but...

The introduction to this book, not by the author but by i-don't-know-who, got me super psyched to read it. Then i read the translator's note...

The translator's note basically says "hey man - don't blame me if this book is weird. #1, the author died before he finished the final edits, and as he started out writing it as an extremely experimental novel (with pages in tic-tac-toe formation for example), and only later decided to make the structure at least physically linear, it was still in a state of what most - including me - would say is a state of disarray. #2, this dude is just weird! #3, you should all know by now that translation is an approximate art. Come on people!"

Given all that, along with the bookmark in the borrowed book at a point _quite_ early on in the thing, i was a bit apprehensive. However, so far (i'm about 100 pages into it, it's about 300 pages?), the structure hasn't bothered me with it's lack of linearity or with it's wont to must about the place of memory and writer and representation.

Also, given that i'm in jordan right now, the book provides some really interesting information about how palestinians (and maybe jordanians) viewed Jordan's actions in the early '70s (particularly Black September - that's what this book is focusing on, or rather it is focusing on the reaction to Black September). Since it usually takes me an entire year to read a history book (if i get through it at all), i'm picking up interesting tidbits i probably wouldn't otherwise from here...

Jason says

As a teenager, when I was tearing rapaciously through the literary masterpieces Jean Genet wrote in the 40s, I was most taken w/ QUERELLE, the novel from that period which would appear to be the least declarative about any ostensible roots in autobiography. THE THIEF'S JOURNAL and the prison novels seemed messier. They were less clearly defined projects from a formal standpoint; they delivered less familiar rewards. In my twenties I read a collection of Genet's political essays, many focused on The Black Panther movement and the Palestinian resistance, enterprises w/ which he had spent some time embedded. Here was

a writer quite distinct from the novelist and playwright I had known in my teens. These were brisk and polemical pieces, clearly delineated and put to seemingly guileless political service. PRISONER is something else again. It would be far too simple (maybe the right word is simply 'incorrect') to suggest that it serves as a synthesis of the literary and polemical Genets. This is clearly a novel written (in the late 80s) in a manner that can only ever find superficial analogue in those of the 40s. And though the subject of the novel is certainly, at least in part, the filiation Genet feels for the Palestinian fedayeen w/ whom he spent two years of his life, and who remained in his thoughts up to his death, this is far from a jeremiad or manifesto. I feel like it is important to frame this book to any prospective reader as something that could be said to boarder on journalism, although that does the breadth of the thing scant service. Genet as narrator is unambiguously himself, and the memories he is dealing w/ are real ones. It is important to note that this book was written more than a decade after those original two years Genet spent w/ the fedayeen, and that during the time he was so embedded he took nary a single note. This is steadfastly a book of memory. And memory is implicitly as much its subject as filiation between outsiders (Genet clearly connected both w/ the Black Panthers and the fedayeen because these groups found themselves violently at odds w/ the geopolitical contexts in which they found themselves). I would say that PRISONER is a Bergsonian novel. It genuinely needs to be called kaleidoscopic, in that it deals w/ how we remember: in interlocking fragments that are ever in the process of spontaneously rearranging themselves. PRISONER is fragmented and nonlinear, to an aggressive extent, and more than once the existential integrity of past events are questioned to the extent that it is conceded that they might well have been dreamed. It is impossible to assess this novel without acknowledging that its writer was well-aware of his own imminent death. This is a "life flashing before my eyes" proposition, and PRISONER is a novel that is flashing. It is a very human novel, humble though ambitious (but not as ambitious, perhaps, as living the events herein recounted in the first place). What is perhaps most striking about it is its gentility. It would seem counterintuitive that history this violent and irreconcilable could be repurposed to serve as a vehicle for the attainment of some late-in-the-game tranquility. But there you have it. And that admiring blurb on the back from Edward Said: that ain't no small thing.

Ta says

Ksi??ka trudna, jesli kto? ?rednio orientuje si? w zawi?o?ciach konfliktu Palesty?iska-Izraelskiego (a dok?adziej Palestyna - reszta ?wiata) – skoki w czasie i przestrzeni, brak linearno?ci wspomnie? sprawia, ?e nie sposób ogranicz? co, gdzie i kiedy. Genet pisze z irytuj?c? manier?, skupiaj?c si? np. na ciele i tym, jak wydepilowane podbrzusze mieli fedaini (i gdyby to raz, to uzna?abym to jako ciekaw? uwag?, ale to powraca i powraca) i przez to odchodzi od g?ownego w?tku swojej historii, czyli cierpie? Palesty?czyków i pozbawiania ich w?asnego kraju.

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David M says

I'm of the opinion that Genet's two greatest books are his first and last - Our Lady of the Flowers and Prisoner of Love, separated by more than forty years.

No, Genet didn't really mellow with age. And yet these pages overflow with the wisdom of an old man. He achieves a certain critical distance from the mythology of his youth. He's no longer trying to shock you. There is significantly less masturbation here than in his other works. Desire is sublimated into camaraderie and struggle. This book is his most honest and committed effort to engage with the world outside his head. All the same the sheer strangeness of him comes across pure and beautiful as ever.

Alyssa Pheobus says

I'm recommending Prisoner of Love to everyone I know, including my mom, but especially to people who make things and think seriously about the ethics of representation. It's essentially a memoir, Genet's last book, written after a long, largely silent period of distancing himself from older work that brought him fame. At the same time it's an account of his long-term involvement with the Palestinian Revolution; a struggle in which he could never wholly participate. The book is amazing because he constantly and performatively interrogates his own ability to tell this story (or any story) and language, both in the air and on the page, becomes one prison among others. But Genet-the-former-criminal has also famously stated (and represented in his gorgeous early film, Chant d'amour) that prisons were the places where he discovered the greatest erotic possibility. His deep fascination with the erotic in everyday life, hugely palpable in his descriptions of instances of repression and release in the militant culture of the fedayeen, makes this book unexpectedly and achingly sexy. Throughout the book Genet also takes some interesting detours into the story of his friendship with the Black Panthers, and makes some boldy poetic connections between their movement and the Palestinian Revolution. I think I came away with a better understanding of the philosophy and ethics of both movements, but I also respect Genet's commitment to a radical ambivalence toward both.

Leonardo says

Tan pronto la nación comienza a conformarse como un Estado soberano, sus funciones progresistas se desvanecen. Jean Genet estaba encantado con el deseo revolucionario de las Panteras Negras y los Palestinos, pero reconoció que cuando se transformaran en naciones soberanas se terminarían sus cualidades revolucionarias. “El día que los palestinos se institucionalicen”, sostuvo, “ya no estaré a su lado. El día que los Palestinos sean una nación como cualquier otra, ya no estaré allí”.

...sobre la experiencia de Genet con las Panteras Negras y los Palestinos, ver su novela final, Prisoners of Love.

Iyad Abou-rabii says

In 1970 Genet visited the Palestinian camps in Jordan, he was drawn by the tragedy of these people, this book is written later and it us affirming Genet's commitment to the justice..., if you care about justice you need to read this.

tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

I probably haven't written an adequate review of a Genet bk yet. This was his last bk & it has a stunning maturity to it. The back cover blurb calls it "a controversial account of the last decades of his life that translates his experience with the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Black Panthers into a meditation on power, territoriality, and the nature of the outsider." "[C]ontroversial"? "[C]ontroversial" w/ whom? Genet had an extremely incisive intellect. If I were to divide his bks up into 3 types, "Prisoner of Love" wd stand alone as the 3rd. The novels, the plays, this. I really don't think I can ever do a Genet bk justice. I 'randomly' open to page 149 wch in turn leads me back to 148. Take this passage:

"My whole life was made up of unimportant trifles blown up into acts of daring.

When I saw that my life was a sort of intaglio or relief in reverse, its hollows became as terrible as abysses. In the process known as damascening the patterns are engraved on a steel plate and inlaid with gold. In me there is no gold.

Being abandoned and left to be brought up as an orphan was a birth that was different from but not any worse than most. Childhood among the peasants whose cows I tended was much the same as any other childhood. My youth as a thief and prostitute was like that of all who steal or prostitute themselves, either in fact or in dream. My visible life was nothing but carefully masked pretenses. Prisons I found rather motherly - more so than the dangerous streets of Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin and Barcelona. In jail I ran no risk of getting killed or dying of hunger; and the corridors were at once the most erotic and the most restful places I've ever known.

The few months I spent in the United States with the Black Panthers are another example of how my life and my books have been misinterpreted. The Panthers saw me as a rebel - unless there was a parallel between us that none of us suspected. For their movement was a shifting dream about the doings of Whites, a poetical revolt, an 'act', rather than a real attempt at radical change.

Once these thoughts were admitted, others followed. If my life was really hollow although it was seen in relief; if the Black Movement was regarded as a sort of impersonation both by America and by me; and if I entered into as simply and naïvely as I've described and was accepted without demur - then it was because I was recognized as a natural sham.

And when the Palestinians invited me to go and stay in Palestine, in other words in a fiction, weren't they too more or less openly recognizing me as a natural sham? Even if I risked annihilation by being present at actions of theirs which were only shams, wasn't I already non-existent because of my own hollow non-life?"

Whew! & that's not even 2 complete pages!! Perhaps "controversial" isn't such a bad word choice after all. If Genet is a "sham" then what is this seemingly soul-baring passage? A sham w/in a sham? A Cretan saying "All Cretans are liars"?! To me, even being able to write the above passage is an act of great heroism. For him to've lived a life such as to make him find prisons "rather motherly" is, in itself, for him to've lead a life I'm greatly relieved to've missed. Then again, for him to be so free of conventional expectations of how to live as to find prisons "rather motherly" shows an extraordinary strength of character.

Do I agree w/ him about the Black Panthers being not "a real attempt at radical change"? No, I don't. Just their free food programs alone are too important to me. But who am I to say? Genet lived w/ Panthers, I've only read about them. I don't recall if Genet ever gives anyone credit for REALLY working toward radical change. Have I? Perhaps the answer here is as yes-and-no as w/ the Panthers. Radical change might result in radical destabilization - wch can mean even more misery than most people already have. As such, symbolic action, "'act'"ing, is a gentler way of promoting change that doesn't have to be violent. Symbolic action can mean getting people used to the need for justice enuf to accept its happening w/o extreme societal destabilization. But even the word "radical" is suspect here. Does it mean back to roots? Or does it mean dramatically changing?

At any rate, my musings in the last paragraph don't do Genet justice. Genet wrote an entire bk, I'm only trying to write a capsule review.. & failing.. If Genet was a sham as a person, he was no sham as a writer!! Perhaps being a "sham" in the sense he presents it is exactly what makes him so astoundingly great. The paragraph that introduces the above quoted passage begins:

"A chicken, boat, bird, dart or aeroplane such as schoolboys make out of bits of paper - if you unfold them carefully they become a page from a newspaper or a blank sheet of paper again. For a long time I'd been vaguely uneasy, but I was amazed when I realized that my life - I mean the events of my life, spread out flat in front of me - was nothing but a blank sheet of paper which I'd managed to fold into something different."

Be that as it may, how many people can make such folds w/ such astounding vision? Very, very few. It seems to me that most people just leave their lives "a blank sheet". Genet took his & turned it into a philosophical drama of great depth & learning, he reported from places in the mind & in the world most of us are content to never personally visit. & I have the utmost respect for him for that.

Miha says

Should a book be considered good just because it is hard? I hated this book, but had to read it through for work. I hated the lack of structure and the lack of a fable as well as lengthy digressions.

Admittedly there are images and insights in there that will stick with me, but they are buried so deeply among the general ramblings that it hardly seems worth the read. If you are looking for an insight into Palestinian-Israeli conflict, look elsewhere.

Aya says

This is a unique book. I do not consider it a memoir, nor a description of a specific experience. It is more of various unrelated thoughts and feelings that were gathered in a book about a specific period of time and

place, but which were related many times in the book to other events in other places in the world and different period of times. The book is unique for many reasons - for me at least: first of all, you can feel the honesty in the words of this book. Genet remembers his years with the Palestinian Fedayeen during the toughest period in Jordan, you feel how much he cares about them and how much he loves specific symbols of their lives. Second, this book talks about a period of time in Jordan which is not taught in history, not discussed (in Jordan at least at the time being) and which I think was exposed to many attempts to erase from memory.

However, because these thoughts are not organized, you feel the book is not focused. It takes you from one place to another and from a specific time to another, but not smoothly. Another point is that the language of the book/or the Arabic translation of it is not that good. There are too many mistakes in the book, but still, this does not take away the beauty of it.

Mai Abdeen says

I read Prisoner of Love some years ago...I longed to live those years to the point that I decided to re-read it in attempt to live the moments all over again,,,to walk around the fedayeen base, to read their love letters, capture the determination look in the eyes of "young lions" to smell the camp, it's dreams and fear...to draw Palestine with a refugee eye...could it be! Am I trapped in this book! Am I the prisoner of love!

Rick says

It's really nothing like his other, earlier novels through which he became famous. However, I wouldn't really have wanted to have read this without knowing that side of Genet, and having knowledge about the rest of his life. To actually understand Genet a bit helps to understand the power of this final work, which is mostly finished and unpolished. It's Genet's final statement to the world just before he died, and it encapsulates passion, it is passion. Genet is the most stunning writer I've ever discovered, and I read this after having first read all his other novels and plays only to be completely awestruck again in a way that I couldn't have predicted. This is Saint Genet's Bible and, honestly: it's beautiful, and very important

El says

This was not a particularly easy-breezy read, but interesting enough for me to want to power through. This is a memoir that does not follow any linear pattern; instead it covers different years, from Genet's time living in a Palestinian refugee camp for a couple years in the early seventies, to time in Beirut during the Israeli invasion in the mid eighties. He talked to fedayeen (militant fighters) and Black Panthers and was unapologetically pro-Palestinian.

Reading this book right now has felt timely. It wasn't my intention when I picked it up - in fact, I didn't even know this book was about Genet's politics - but once I got into it and so much of what I was reading was mirroring things I've been reading in the news lately, I found myself wondering if Genet would still have taken the same stance today or if he might have felt differently. There's a lot of history here that pre-dates me, you, Genet, pretty much everyone, and there are a lot of emotions driving each side of the Israeli/Palestinian divide.

Genet started writing this memoir ten years after his initial time spent in the refugee camps and he worked on this up until his death. The memoir was published posthumously, so one wonders if it was as complete as he would have liked. I also can't help but wonder the veracity of some of his anecdotes for he says throughout in different ways that the image of something is not necessarily the reality of the thing, something I am fond of pointing out to people to piss them off (or when they piss *me* off, rather). Genet admits that his reflections were at times somewhat romantic, which is okay. His experiences were his own and he could do with them what he wished. His memoir is one more side of a very complicated story and I will not dare to say he was right or wrong.
