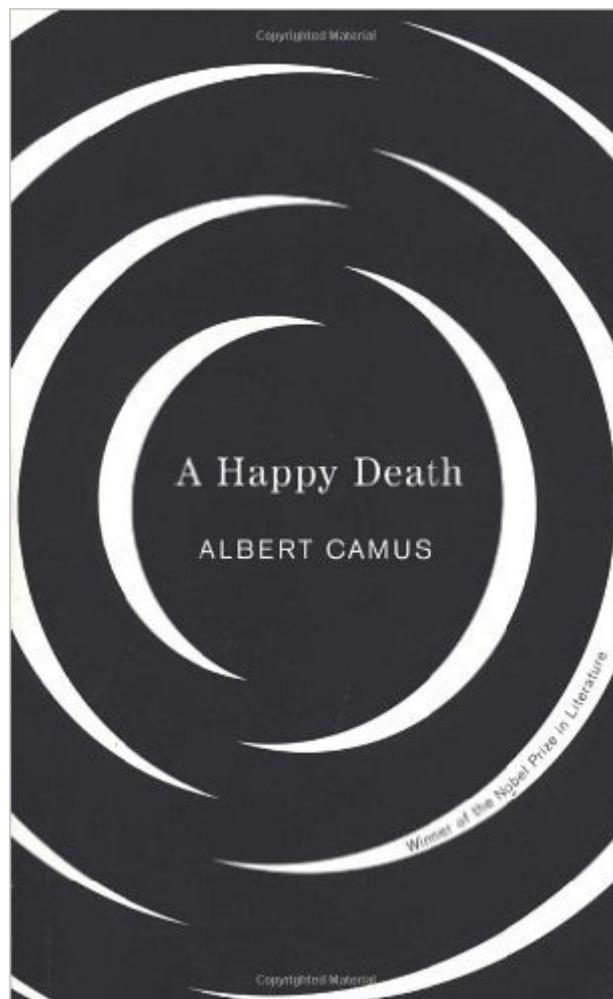


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A Happy Death



Synopsis

In his first novel, *A Happy Death*, written when he was in his early twenties and retrieved from his private papers following his death in 1960, Albert Camus laid the foundation for *The Stranger*, focusing in both works on an Algerian clerk who kills a man in cold blood. But he also revealed himself to an extent that he never would in his later fiction. For if *A Happy Death* is the study of a rule-bound being shattering the fetters of his existence, it is also a remarkably candid portrait of its author as a young man. As the novel follows the protagonist, Patrice Mersault, to his victim's house -- and then, fleeing, in a journey that takes him through stages of exile, hedonism, privation, and death -- it gives us a glimpse into the imagination of one of the great writers of the twentieth century. For here is the young Camus himself, in love with the sea and sun, enraptured by women yet disdainful of romantic love, and already formulating the philosophy of action and moral responsibility that would make him central to the thought of our time. Translated from the French by Richard Howard

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In "A Happy Death", Camus took a different approach to writing what later became "The Stranger". The latter work is famous (and sometimes despised) for its terse, efficient prose, its brutal frankness, and its avoidance of moral consideration. As a result, many readers do not know what to make of Mersault and often mistake him for a psychopath. In "A Happy Death", Camus writes in the third person and adds considerably more elements to the story. The ending also differs from "The Stranger". In "The Stranger", Mersault kills an Arab for no apparent reason other than caprice or

irritability. Merseault is then put on trial and condemned more for his flagrant aversion to bourgeois hypocrisy than for the crime he committed. But in "A Happy Death", Merseault's crime had a clearer motive and a deeper symbolism. Merseault kills his crippled friend Zagreus in order to obtain his wealth and use it to transform his otherwise mundane life. In Greek mythology, Zagreus was torn apart by the Titans but Zeus was able to give his still beating heart to his daughter who later fathered Dinoysis, the god of wine. Zagreus literally means "torn apart" in Greek. The myth of Zagreus is comparable to the role of Christ in the Christian tradition because Zagreus was mocked, tortured, and executed. But unlike Christ, Zagreus escaped the final humiliation by having a substitute take his place. Camus re-appropriates this legend in "A Happy Death". The wheelchair bound Zagreus essentially prompts Merseault to murder him so that he can escape the humiliation of his infirmity and pass his wealth on to Merseault. There are subtle indications that the two men are inextricably bound to each other.

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