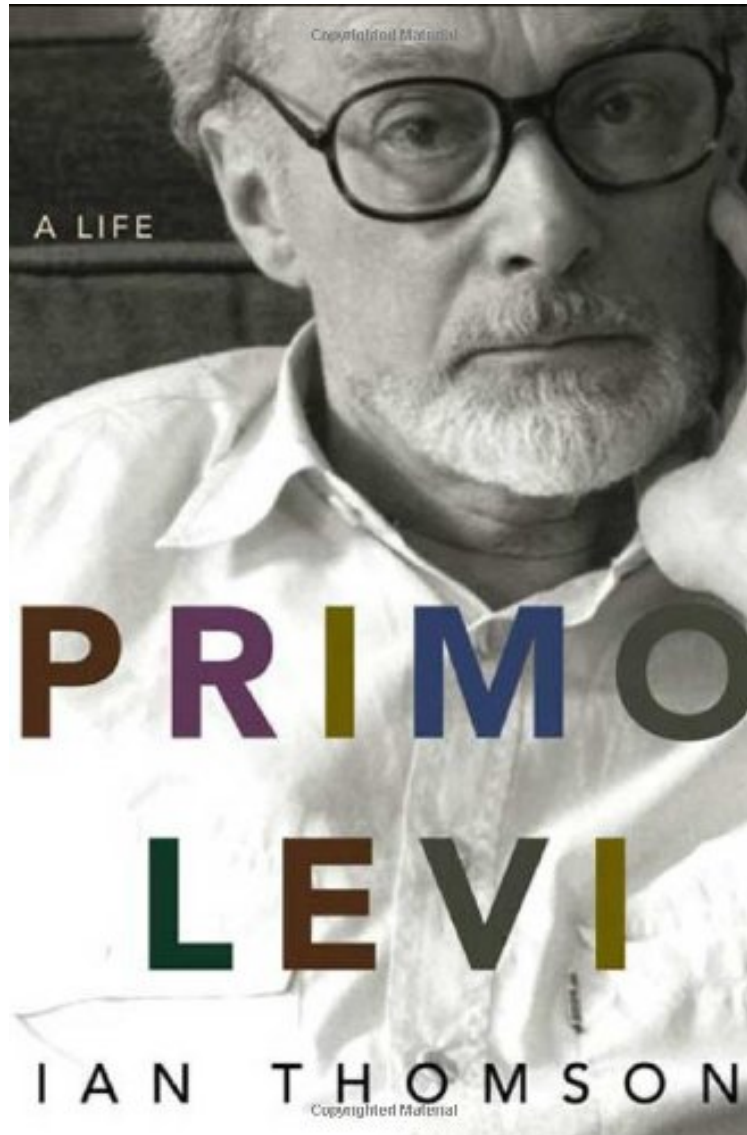


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Primo Levi: A Life

Ian Thomson

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Ian Thomson : Primo Levi: A Life before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Primo Levi: A Life:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Flawed but worthwhile readBy William PatryMr. Thomson devoted a great deal of time and effort in writing his work, and I am glad I took the time and effort to read it. No one biographer can capture the life of someone like Primo Levi, but Mr. Thomson's interviewing of so many of Primo Levi's friends and family provides a very rich portrait, but one that doesn't get bogged down in details. This is no small

accomplishment. Among the issues preventing me from giving the book more stars are Mr. Thomson's relentless psycho-babble interjections. Every woman whom Primo Levi befriends occasions a remark by Mr. Thomson that the relationship was not only asexual but in being asexual was reflective of a deep character attribute, but one that is never spelled out. At the same time, he repeatedly claims that Levi's friendships with male friends have a homoerotic tinge. This is cheap, dime-store stuff, and so very antithetical to Levi's always proper behavior. Levi deserves better. Mr. Thomson also constantly claims that people "must" have thought this or that without the slightest evidence to support such views. This is gross speculation masquerading as fact. About a quarter of the way from the end of the book, all of the writing is focused on the final event in the book, Levi's alleged suicide. We are treated to dozens of dozens of pages about his depression about how people (always after the fact) either "knew" or suspected that Levi would take his life. There is no effort to present other viewpoints, nothing of the measured nature of Diego Gambetta's 1999 article in the Boston Review (see here: [...]). Instead there are psycho-babble theories going back to Levi's grandfather's death. Everyone will come to their own conclusions, but to construct a serious biography of such a careful, precise man around only one conclusion is, to me, a substantial flaw. In the end, for me this is a serious work, with some very annoying flaws.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. This book is as tiresome as listening to some neighborhood gossip who cannot leave ...

By carolinaislandgirl It is difficult to give Primo Levi's biography a low rating, the man deserved a biography that shone with the careful use of language his own narrative work exemplified. This book is as tiresome as listening to some neighborhood gossip who cannot leave one speck of information undivulged. So our wonderful Primo Levi has been overtaken by a loquacious storyteller who manages to make the remarkable life of Levi Primo sink into utterly mundane prose and unimportant detail. So sad that the author could not ferret out the important and leave all the rest behind. Very disappointing.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Too Many Facts?

By Mr. B It is soon apparent, when reading Ian Thomson's Primo Levi: A Life, that the author has undertaken a prodigious amount of literary detective work on his subject. Seemingly everyone who ever knew Levi, everyone who knew someone who knew Levi, and anyone who knew anything about Levi was interviewed (over 300 people, we learn on the second page of the authors preface). The resulting chronology of Levi's life is certainly comprehensive. In addition, Thomson is well versed in everything Levi ever published or wrote, including his voluminous letters, and he weaves Levi's own words into the narrative to fill out the contours of his life. All this is good. Thomson, however, falls victim to the sin many biographers commit: he never met a fact he didn't like. Consequently we are treated to details, relationships and events which might make interesting cocktail chatter, and which could easily have been consigned to the footnotes, but which the author felt compelled to include, not because they help shed any meaningful light on Levi, his life, his personality, his worldview, but rather, it seems, because the author needed to show the world every last thing he had uncovered in his labors. For example, it's nice to know that Levi was born July 31, 1919. Less critical perhaps is the fact that he was one of twelve babies born in Turin that day. Wholly unnecessary is the fact that the twelve consisted of nine males and three females according to the local newspapers. (p. 18). It also might be nice to know that Levi often visited his maternal relatives' villa in Piosasco, and that the caretaker's daughter Maria sometimes looked after young Primo. But of what relevance is it to learn that Maria (who is never referred to again) once sat through an entire Jewish banquet cradling a pet goose in her lap? (p. 24). When Levi is reunited with two of his writer friends to share experiences of the war and resistance (p. 362) is it really necessary to tell us that they enjoyed a meal of polenta porridge and pork? After spending an entire page setting out in excruciating detail the contents of an inventory taken after the Fascists expropriated the Levi apartment in the autumn of 1944 (two tennis racquets, without strings) Thomson explains in a parenthetical that it was his sleuthing in old bank files which turned up the inventory. He then feels the need to tell us that when he showed this inventory to Levi's daughter she was visibly disturbed at seeing it for the first time, without elucidating what made the revelation so disturbing. Kudos to the author for finding it, but the entire point could have been handled in a sentence or two (and without the parenthetical). Naturally, nothing further is heard of this incident; it's on to the next tangential fact that the author wants to cram in. What makes this overload all the more egregious, and doubly ironic, is the author's repeated praise of Levi's concision in all of his writings. Levi's very strength lay in the fact that he was a writer whose instinct was to pare down rather than amplify. If Thomson had emulated his subject more, pared rather than amplified, he might have produced a better, more concise work without in any way diminishing his portrait of Primo Levi. Three and one-half stars.

Primo Levi, author of *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Periodic Table*, wrote books that have been called the essential works of humankind. Yet he lived an unremarkable existence, remaining until his death in the house in which he'd been born; managing a paint and varnish factory for thirty years; and tending his invalid mother to the last. Now, in a matchless account, Ian Thomson unravels the strands of a life as improbable as it was influential, the story of the most modest of men who became a universal touchstone of conscience and humanism. Drawing on exclusive access to family members and previously unseen correspondence, Thomson reconstructs the world of Levi's youth—the rhythms of Jewish life in Turin during the Mussolini years—as well as his experience in Auschwitz and difficult reintegration into postwar Italy. Thomson presents Levi in all his facets: his fondness for Louis Armstrong and fast cars, his

insomnia and many near-catastrophic work accidents. Finally, he explores the controversy and isolation of Levi's later years, along with the increasing tensions in his life-between his private anguish and gift for friendship; his severe bouts of depression and passion for life and ideas; his pervasive dread and reasoned, pragmatic ethic. Praised in Britain as "the best sort of history" and "a model of its kind," *Primo Levi: A Life* is certain to take its place as the standard biography and a necessary companion to the works themselves.

From Publishers Weekly Thomson's biography of Primo Levi comes a little over a year after Carole Angier's Levi biography, *The Double Bond*. The merits of the two are sharply distinct from each other. Where Angier considered broader questions of culture and identity, Thomson is brisk and novelistic. Thomson had extensive, exclusive access to Levi papers and family members, where Angier had almost none. For that reason alone, any Leviphile will derive considerable pleasure from Thomson's account. The fast-paced narrative sometimes results in frustratingly concise characterizations ("Chemistry was to be a powerful magnet for the inadequate teenager looking for a focus to his life"), but that may well be the price for a book that follows Levi's comings and goings so closely. Thomson, who has translated the novels of Sicilian crime writer Leonardo Sciascia into English and wrote *Bonjour Blanc*, is particularly attentive to the often glossed-over later years of the author's life, tracing the twin courses of his publishing career and his deepening struggle with depression. Since Levi's tragic suicide in 1987, the search for the true man behind the mythic Holocaust survivor has only intensified; Levi biographers always find they must compete not only with each other but with their subject, whose immortal memoirs will inevitably have the final say. In the end, Thomson's contribution may concentrate more on the trees than the forest, but its smoothly assembled accumulation of details renders an invaluable service to the Levi legacy. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist Levi's books are landmark accounts of the Holocaust experience and the enduring questions of guilt and survival. But this is very much the biography of an ordinary man with all his flaws, a secular assimilated Jew who bungled his role in the Resistance and up to the time of his own deportation in 1943 refused to believe the accounts of Nazi atrocity. Drawing on hundreds of interviews with friends, family, and other witnesses, and on one long interview with Levi himself shortly before his suicide in 1987, Thomson writes with authority about his subject's thoughts, feelings, and memories. The sources are fully documented, but the notes never intrude on the accessible narrative. Unlike Carole Angier in *The Double Bond* (2002), Thomson doesn't spend much time analyzing Levi's private life, but many readers will want more about Levi's books and less detail about what he did month by month. "Survivors can be troublesome and tedious," Levi said, and it is that voice without a hint of sanctimony that bears witness in this authoritative biography. Hazel Rochman Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved "A masterpiece of fact and revelation, unlikely to be surpassed"--The Daily Telegraph