



If This is a Man Primo Levi

About the book

If This is a Man is Primo Levi's memoir of his experiences in the Nazi concentration camp, Auschwitz III. Between 1944 and 1945 Levi spent 11 months as a prisoner in the camp where conditions were so brutal that life expectancy was only three months for new prisoners. *If This is a Man* recounts not only the author's extraordinary survival of Auschwitz, but the reasons behind the inhumanity of the Nazi concentration camp system.

The book begins with Levi's capture by Italian Fascist forces followed by deportation to Auschwitz by cattle-truck. From this point onwards we are immersed in the dehumanising horrors of Auschwitz. The author describes the gruelling physical labour which killed many, the brutal violence handed out by guards and the struggle for daily survival. Often the margins between life and death came down to securing a pair of shoes, an extra piece of bread or trips to the 'toilet' at night. In order to understand how life can be reduced to such degradation, Levi explores the reasons behind the treatment of prisoners within Auschwitz. *If This is a Man* is an utterly compelling exploration of the Nazi concentration camp system. Ultimately, Levi reveals a disturbing insight into the human capacity to produce such horrors.

About the author

Primo Levi was born in 1919 to a Jewish family in Turin, Italy. After completing his studies in chemistry in 1941, he began working in mines despite anti-semitic measures that prevented Jews gaining such employment. By 1944, Levi had joined the resistance in Italy and was captured by Fascist forces. After surviving Auschwitz, Levi returned to Italy and pursued work in both chemistry and writing. Although *If This is a Man* only sold modestly when first published in 1947, a republishing in 1958 propelled the author to international recognition. Before his untimely death in 1987, Levi published a number of other acclaimed works, including the *The Drowned and the Saved* and *The Periodic Table*.

Discussion Questions

Please note that some of these questions will act as spoilers for the book.

1. why does Primo Levi struggle with the fact that he survived Auschwitz?
2. some commentators have suggested Levi's account of Auschwitz is delivered in an objective way. Would you agree with this opinion?
3. what role do you believe memoirs like Primo Levi's have in our understanding of the Holocaust today?
4. why was it so important in the author's opinion that prisoners at Auschwitz retained fragments of humanity?

You can use HMD resources to find out more about:

The Holocaust <http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust>

What life in the camps looked like <http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/image-library/life-in-the-camps>

Night, another well-known account of surviving the Holocaust by Elie Wiesel
<http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/for-adults/books-for-adults-night>