

Camus in America

An Interview with Alice KAPLAN and Tobias WOLFF

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Described as “the admirable conjunction of a man, of an action, and of a work” by Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus embodies the very French figure of the “*intellectuel engagé*,” or public intellectual. The interest he still arouses in the United States reveals how much his work has been the object of enduring fascination for the American readership.

Alice Kaplan is the John M. Musser Professor of French at Yale University. Her most recent book, *Looking for The Stranger: Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic*, is an essential work, an in depth biography of *the Stranger*. It was published simultaneously in America and in France in September 2016 (*En quête de L'Étranger*, Gallimard). Alice Kaplan works at the intersection of literature and history, using a method that allies archival research with textual analysis. She is a former Guggenheim Fellow, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a recipient of the French *Légion d'Honneur* as well the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in History (for *The Collaborator*) and the Henry Adams Prize (for *The Interpreter*). She is the author of *French Lessons: A Memoir* (1993), *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach* (2000), *The Interpreter* (2005), *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis* (2012).

Tobias Wolff is one of the foremost fiction writers of America today. A master storyteller, he is the author of the memoirs *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army*, the novels *Old School* and *The Barracks Thief*, and the short story collections *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, *Back in the World*, *The Night in Question*, and *Our Story Begins*. The Ward W. and Priscilla B. Woods Emeritus Professor of English at Stanford University, he received a National Medal of the Arts from President Obama in September 2015. Other awards include the PEN/Malamud Award and the Rea Award – both for excellence in the short story – the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and the PEN/Faulkner Award. He has also been the editor of *Best American Short Stories*, *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories*, and *A Doctor's Visit: The Short Stories of Anton Chekhov*. His work appears regularly in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and other magazines and literary journals.

March 2016 marked the 70th anniversary of Albert Camus' one (and only) visit to the US. The anniversary was celebrated in New York City by the festival *A Stranger in the City*, a month-long program of debates, lectures, readings, and concerts organized by the French Cultural Services,¹ in partnership with the Camus Estate. The festival was deemed a great success.

Camus' presence has long been permeating the American literary and artistic scene, and has been acknowledged by many as an inspiring example, as shown by the use of a Camus' quote by the novelist Richard Powers in the epigraph to his 2009 novel *Generosity*: “*la vraie générosité envers l'avenir consiste à tout donner au présent*”². Even more recent references to Camus³ have proven how tangible — perhaps more than ever before — his presence remains in the American cultural landscape in 2016.

A reflection on Camus' long-lasting legacy in America is at the heart of a discussion with two distinguished American professors and award-winning authors, **Alice Kaplan**, Yale Professor of French, and **Tobias Wolff**, Stanford Professor of English. As Camus' enthusiasts, they have been teaching *The Stranger* to generations of students.

Books & Ideas: When did you read Camus for the first time?

Alice Kaplan: I first read Camus at the Ecole Arcadie French camp in Bar Harbor, Maine, when I was fifteen. I read the novel again in high school, and again in college. Like many American students of French, I learned the difference between the *passé composé*, the *imparfait* and the *plus-que-parfait* from sentences in *The Stranger* written on a blackboard. I still remember them: “*J'ai senti que j'avais été heureux, et que je l'étais encore.*” Then in college, I studied Camus in an existentialist trinity with Beauvoir and Sartre. It was years before I understood how many factors separated Camus from Beauvoir and Sartre - his education, his Algerian poverty, his relationship to nature. In fact Algeria was pretty much absent from my studies of *The Stranger*—and so Algeria was the missing piece I wanted to provide in my history of the novel, by traveling to the places where Camus wrote and the places he portrays in the novel.

Tobias Wolff: My brother, Geoffrey⁴, gave me *The Stranger* the summer I turned fifteen. My brother also had me read *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Fall*, and *The Plague* – all in English, of

¹ <http://frenchculture.org/books/festivals/camus-stranger-city>

² “Real generosity towards the future lies in giving all to the present”.

³ <http://frenchculture.org/books/events/reading-and-conversation-patti-smith-camus>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEBeaoMCAk>

⁴ Geoffrey Wolff, seven years older than Tobias Wolff, is also a University Professor, an accomplished writer, and the author of the masterpiece *The Duke of Deception. Memories of my father* (1979). See “An Interview with Tobias Wolff”, *The Missouri Review*, Issue 26.3 (Winter 2003): “Fusion” <http://www.missourireview.com/archives/bbarticle/an-interview-with-tobias-wolff/> and Francine Prose, “The Brothers Wolff”, *The New York Times*, February 5, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/05/magazine/the-brothers-wolff.html?pagewanted=all>

course. I don't pretend to have really grasped these novels. They were pretty sophisticated for someone of that age, but my brother wanted me to get a taste of complex texts. Later that year, I read it in French class. We were encouraged to understand the novel as an expression of Existentialism, whatever that means at any given moment. I was struggling with the language, but even so I could sense a distinctive tone. I first read *The Stranger* in Stuart Gilbert's translation [1946], later Joseph Laredo's [1982], but Matthew Ward's [1988] is the one I like best, though I do enjoy some of the strange colors that Gilbert's translation brings to the work. At the end of the novel, when Meursault is anticipating being brought out for execution, Gilbert writes that he is looking forward to the crowd's "howls of execration." In Matthew Ward's translation, it is "cries of hate," which is closer to Camus, but I love that "howls of execration." This was the first serious novel I read in which the narrator was a murderer, and there was no redemption at the end. It's certainly not a redemption narrative, though some believe that it is – that his heightened self-consciousness and self-affirmation at the end somehow elevate him to heroic, even Christ-like stature. He certainly sees himself that way.

Books & Ideas: How do you teach it differently than the way it was taught to you?

Alice Kaplan: When I teach *The Stranger*, I want students to understand Camus' audacious experiment in first-person writing. American students are specialists of the first-person narrative—after all, they've mastered the autobiographical essay for their college applications. They know a lot about how powerful a confessional device the first person can be. How unnerving for them to encounter Meursault, who says "I" but never lets the reader feel close to him. How does Camus do that? I still find *The Stranger* as puzzling and gripping as I did when I was fifteen. The voice has something to do with it, along with the limpid music of the sentences and the rough sensuality of the Algerian setting. There is also the structure—the perfect symmetry of a life cut in two by a murder on the beach. *The Stranger* is minimalist—perfectly controlled, but still lyrical. That's another mystery. Many of my students have already read *The Stranger* in high school, so reading it in college becomes for them an exercise in rereading, a chance to try on new critical approaches and understand the changing forms that literary interpretation can take.

Tobias Wolff: Since I began teaching courses on the novel form many years ago, I have almost always included *The Stranger* in my syllabus. It is very rich. There is much to talk about. It's important to me in teaching literature to help students understand that there is a difference between the writer and the writer's narrator – the character telling the story. Students are inclined to think that Meursault speaks for Camus, which he does not, so it's a great book to teach in that way, but it's also an enduringly contemporary book. The particular circumstances here and there might be different, but it has lost nothing over time. Take the trial, for example, with its almost farcical exposure of the limitations of human judgment, governed as it is by reflexive cultural notions of what is proper behavior in different

circumstances. The situation of women in the novel, particularly how they are seen by men, makes it ripe for a feminist reading. Meursault's view of the native population, a view common to French Algerians, throws light on the colonial experience of both colonizer and colonized. Look at Meursault's complete incuriosity about the man he is killing, his complete failure of empathy. The man he murders is always just "the Arab" to him. That's it. There is a sort of self-congratulation in Meursault's description of his own sensitivity to light, and to the sea, and the sounds of the city as he sits on his balcony, happily watching life and being alive. It's charming and endearing, but we should note that he kills "the Arab" exactly when this man is having his own moment of sensual enjoyment, lying down in this cool place by the spring, but Meursault wants that place and "the Arab" is in the way – the whole colonial experience re-enacted here in a single scene. The reality of another man who shares the human pleasure in coolness on a hot day, and running water, and music, the joy of sensory life, means nothing to Meursault, not then or ever. A professor I sometimes taught this novel with was seduced – in my view – by the second half of the book, believing that the supposed elevation of Meursault's spirit, and his lyrical, emphatic affirmation of himself, raised the character to another, heroic level. Yes, Meursault does become more reflective but in truth no more responsible, no more able to recognize the significance of what he has done. Note that when he murders "the Arab" he says "the trigger gave," as if he did not make it give; nor does he ever acknowledge his responsibility for the man's death, or express the slightest remorse. He has become more self-conscious only to justify himself more poetically. His imagination has no reach; it's confined to self-celebration – "I was right, I was right, I was always right" – as surely as Meursault is confined to his cell.

I am not sure that Camus would agree with my reading of his novel, but that is the novel he wrote. When my colleague talked about Meursault becoming a hero in the last pages of the book, he had to bring that idea in from outside the text, from comments Camus made about Meursault – that Meursault is condemned because he "doesn't play the game," that "he refuses to lie." The character Camus describes here is not to be found in the text, except in Meursault's distorted idea of himself. For example, while in prison Meursault cherishes a newspaper article about a man who comes home to his family's hotel after years away and does not tell his mother and his sister who he is, and they kill him for a bag of money and threw his body in the river. You don't play games, Meursault says contemptuously of the murdered man, with implicit self-congratulation. Well, why is Meursault here? He's here precisely because he plays games, and lies. He's the one who sets this disaster in motion by pretending to be Raymond, writing a duplicate letter in his name because he says: "I could not think of a reason not to." He already harbors suspicions about Raymond, who has a reputation as a pimp and a thug. But Meursault disregards that, and sets everything in motion by playing a very nasty game, luring a woman he doesn't know into danger and humiliation, then swearing falsely to the police in support of Raymond. It was Meursault who created the situation that led to "the Arab's" murder, the games Meursault played, the lies he told to others and himself. But he does not recognize this – *will not* recognize this.

Books & Ideas: What explains the fascination that Camus' work continues to exert on the American reader, particularly on the young public?

Alice Kaplan: For a few months I set out to take pictures of people reading Camus on the New York subway. They were invariably in their twenties, and the book was usually *The Stranger* or *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Then I met a college student in Florida who had the entire murder scene of *The Stranger* tattooed on his arm by a renowned tattoo artist—including the silvery glint off the knife. Obviously that’s an extreme case. Many young Americans read *The Stranger* in high school, in and out of class—the novel is really a rite of passage for young people, part of becoming a thinking person. There is a Camus book for every phase of life: *The Stranger* for alienated adolescents; *The Plague*, with its community spirit, for college students, NGO people. *The Fall*, a story of self-recrimination, is for mid-life, for disenchanted lawyers or hedge fund managers; *The First Man* is for an older phase, for looking back...

Camus writes with passion and moral clarity about the most disturbing and challenging issues of our own times: terror, our failing environment, senseless vigilante killing, and the forms that resistance can take. I got chills hearing Viggo Mortensen read Camus’ 1946 speech, “The Human Crisis,” at Columbia this past spring. It felt as if Camus were as close to us now as he was 70 years ago, when, for example, he talks about how his generation was forced to adapt to a world of terror and murder, and how venom would remain in the hearts of men long after the demise of Hitler. Camus speaks to us today, but he has really never stopped speaking to us. He is certainly the most beloved French literary figure in the United States for the modern era—outflanking Sartre, Proust, and Céline. In France and internationally, his fame dates back to the immediate postwar era, when he emerged as the voice of the French resistance. After 1962, he entered into a kind of purgatory in France, because he had favored a moderate Algerian nationalism and opposed the *Front de Libération Nationale*, the revolutionary party that ushered Algeria to independence, with strong support from the French left. But Camus’ purgatory came to an end in 1994, when the unfinished novel found in the car wreck that killed him was finally published. Michiko Kakutani⁵ called that book, *The First Man*, a Rosetta stone for understanding the rest of Camus’ work, and I think she was exactly right. His impoverished beginnings, the silence of his deaf mother, his love of sport and sun, his shame about his class origins—all these elements of the posthumous novel shed light on his previous books, as though Camus were finally inviting his readers into his home. *The First Man* made Camus readable again: told from the perspective of a man who was neither a colonizer nor a native but the child of poor settlers, it confounds the knee-jerk political rejection of the writer.

Tobias Wolff: *The Stranger* is a model of purposeful narration, the apparent naturalness of Meursault’s voice bringing him vividly to life, yet you have to keep stepping back from it because what he takes for granted, simply assumes, can lull you into a kind of complicity with him. He seems a relaxed, easy sort of fellow at the beginning, hanging out with his friends, running for a tram, watching the fans come back from the soccer game wearing their different scarves. He enjoys life and the observation of life. Only later do we see by what rigorous control his performance of ease is maintained, and the violence that can erupt when that

⁵ Michiko Kakutani, “A Fatherless Boy in Algeria, Like Camus”, *The New York Times*, August 25, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/25/books/books-of-the-times-a-fatherless-boy-in-algeria-like-camus.html>

control is broken. Camus never directly connects his novel to the particular historical context of its time, doesn't instruct us to understand it historically. It exists on its own, but I can't help reflecting that he wrote it at a time when people were going along with mass movements so destructive that they turned much of Europe into a slaughterhouse and a ruin because, like Meursault, those people could not think of a reason not to go along. Very few did resist the tide. I wonder how Camus, who did resist, could have written *The Stranger* without seeing Meursault as a sort of archetypal player in that catastrophe.

Books & Ideas: You recently published a biography of *The Stranger, Looking for the Stranger*.⁶ You went to Algeria, and you managed to find new clues about the Arab killed on the beach. Could you discuss your discoveries?

Alice Kaplan: Camus' major biographers, Olivier Todd and Herbert Lottman, describe an event they believe inspired Camus' story—a brawl that took place on a beach outside Oran between a European Algerian and an Arab Algerian, just before World War II. No one was killed, but there are enough shared details to indicate that Camus drew quite a bit on the incident in *The Stranger*. The biographers interviewed the European in the fight, a man named Raoul Bensoussan. He was actually an Algerian Jew with French citizenship—an important nuance. Neither biographer showed any curiosity about the Arab in the fight. I was driven by the idea that I might be able to recover the Arab's side of the story... Working with old Oran newspapers, I stumbled upon an article about a brawl on the beach in Bouisseville, naming Bensoussan. And more surprising, naming the Arab in the fight! With luck and some excellent help in Oran, I was able to interview the brother and the sister of that man, Kaddour Touil. A fiction writer's job is to transpose a real story, or stories, into fiction... In *Looking for The Stranger*, I work backwards, moving from the novel to its sources, in order to understand Camus' process as a fiction writer, his transpositions, his art.

Books & Ideas: The literary echoes between *The Stranger* and *The Postman always rings twice* by James Cain are striking. Could you give us your own appreciation of those echoes?

Alice Kaplan: Cain's novel was his model for the flat first person narrator, speaking from death row. That death row narrator gives *The Postman Always Rings Twice* a spooky 'beyond the grave' quality, which *The Stranger* shares. I was struck by the fact that Frank Chambers, the murderer in *Postman*, likes to refer to his victim as "The Greek"... Calling Nick Papadakis by his ethnic label, rather than his name, dehumanizes him and heightens the sense of racial tensions in that depression-era, California setting. In *The Stranger*, Camus refers to Meursault's victim simply as "the Arab." Critics have condemned Camus for that choice, and readers today still feel the violence of that namelessness. I believe that not naming the Arab was deliberate, rather than an unconscious racist gesture—it was Camus' way, inspired by Cain, to heighten the sense of a violent, racially troubled society.

⁶ Alice Kaplan, *Looking for "The Stranger": Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic*, University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Tobias Wolff: Later, learning more about Camus after my first encounter with *The Stranger*, I was pleased to see that some of this tone actually came from American noir, from James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, for instance. The affectless voice of that novel is very like the voice of Meursault, up to the second half of *The Stranger*, when he becomes more lyrical and introspective. I love that Camus acknowledged Cain, because it is very rare for literary writers to give credit to genre writers for their inspiration, though in fact we all come up that way. We come up reading boy and girl detective stories, mysteries, historical novels, maybe even romances, and then we try to erase the evidence of our influences. There's some Hemingway here, too. At first I could not see his influence on *The Stranger* because I did not know French well enough, but later, yes, especially Hemingway's short stories. "The Killers," for example, and even "Big Two-Hearted River," where the deliberate prose and the minute attention to routine and the external world reflect Nick's attempt to muffle emotions that threaten to overwhelm him. We see that in Meursault's voice, and in his resolutely outward gaze. He's terrified of his own feelings, of anyone's feelings – and paradoxically that's what puts him back on the beach the day of the killing, fleeing the tears of the women in the house, as he was disturbed by the weeping of the women at his mother's funeral vigil and the demonstrations of grief by his mother's friend Pérez.

Books & Ideas: How do we reconcile the novel with Camus' statement that "Meursault is the only Christ that we deserve" ⁷?

Tobias Wolff: Meursault sees himself as a kind of Christ, about to be led to his death through a jeering crowd, condemned for offenses against bourgeois decorum – smoking beside his mother's casket, not weeping over her death, going to a comic movie and making love to a woman not his wife on the night of his mother's funeral, and not pretending to feel emotions – grief, remorse – society expects of him. And he is right about all that. He probably wouldn't have been sentenced to death for killing an Arab in that colonial society had he not flouted the proprieties of mourning. And that's another point of interest in this novel – its concern with the limits of our judgment, the ways in which we accept notions of good and evil based on unconscious, conventional assumptions about how people should behave. The novel is very shrewd about that. The mistake that readers can make, are indeed *invited* to make, is to take it from there and say, well then, since he is being judged and executed for the wrong reasons, trivial reasons, he is innocent. They're killing him for not being a bourgeois! But he is not innocent. He murdered a man, and murdered him just for being where Meursault wanted to be.

So how do we reconcile the novel with Camus' statement that "Meursault is the only Christ we deserve?" How does that work? Over the years I have had to teach myself, as I try to teach my students, not only to separate the writer from the character, but also to separate the work

⁷ Albert Camus, "I also happen to say, again paradoxically, that I had tried to draw in my character the only Christ we deserve", preface to the American University Edition of *The Stranger*, January 8th, 1955, also published as an afterword in other editions.

itself from the ideas the writer might have voiced about the work. Writers are not always accurate judges, or even describers, of their own work. They might describe a different book than the one you've read, because they are describing their intentions for it, not what they have actually written. And what they've written is sometimes better than their intentions for it -- more complex, more interestingly in tension with itself. I suspect something like that happened with Camus and "*The Stranger*." It is no disrespect to say that its greatness may well be the greatness of a work that transcends the intention the writer had for it.

Books & Ideas: It seems that this interest in Camus is primarily centered on a single work, *The Stranger*, but also extends to new works and to new translations, such as *The Algerian Chronicles*.

Alice Kaplan: We published the first English language translation of *Algerian Chronicles* at Harvard UP in 2013 for Camus' centenary (ed. Alice Kaplan, trans. Arthur Goldhammer). The critical response took us completely by surprise. Here was a seventy-year-old book, a translation to boot, and yet the major intellectual and literary reviews in the U.S. and England covered it as a literary event—as if it were a new publication. Claire Messud in *The New York Review of Books*, Paul Berman in *The New Republic*, Susan Suleiman in *The New York Times*, Thomas Meaney in *The Nation* —and many more—used the occasion of this belated publication to revisit the knot of positions around decolonization, Islamic fundamentalism, and the colonial factor in the threat of terror today. *Algerian Chronicles* is a collection of articles chosen by Camus over a period of three decades. It shows the young anti-colonialist Camus at Alger-Républicain in the 1930s, and then the despairing Camus at the height of the Algerian war, just before the demise of the fourth republic. It was his last attempt to try to make sense of the situation. He died in 1960, two years before Algerian independence. *Algerian Chronicles* has reached historians and intellectuals, but of course it doesn't touch readers the way the fiction does. Camus' greatest power is as a story teller, a myth maker. And of course the Algerian writer Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation*, now translated into over twenty-five languages, has put *The Stranger* back into the hands of a whole new generation of readers, since people read the two books in tandem.

The Meursault Investigation is a critique of religious and political fundamentalism in contemporary Algeria.. And yet it is meaningful to readers who know nothing about Algeria. That's the power of a universal reading experience. Daoud came to Yale last fall when the campus was on fire over issues of race and speech.... In his lecture, he addressed hard questions about exactly what it means to be 'othered'— what it means for some lives to matter more than others. That is the question at the core of his novel—and at the core of *The Stranger*, too. (Camus himself said that no European would have been sentenced to death for killing an Arab—he makes the Arab entirely incidental to Meursault's death sentence....). What I love about *The Meursault Investigation* is the way Daoud confounds our expectations. We think we're in a post-colonial take down of *The Stranger*. Harun wants to avenge his brother Musso, who has been killed in a book that doesn't even name him. But that's not all. Midway through the novel, just after Algerian independence, Harun kills a European—and feels an uncomfortable solidarity with Meursault. Meursault and Harun turn out to be brothers

in violence. So this takedown of Camus is also an homage. There is nothing black and white about it.

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