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Albert Camus. *The First Man.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. viii + 325 pp. $23.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-43937-0.

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Although controversy surrounded his life and work, Albert Camus remains one of the most significant and influential literary, political, and philosophical minds of the 20th century. *The First Man*, Camus' unfinished autobiographical novel, offers readers a glimpse of the author's life in an unusually unguarded and powerful way.

In 1960 Albert Camus died in a car accident; found in the wreckage of that accident was the hand-written manuscript of his last novel, *Le Premier Homme*(*The First Man*). At the time of his death, Camus had fallen out of favor with the French intellectuals. Camus' emphasis on the individual conscience, his criticisms of socialism, and his defense of an independent and multicultural Algeria made him a target from the political left and right. Consequently, there were some who tried to argue that Camus' later works lacked the power and importance readers found in his earlier writings: *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, *The Rebel*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Considering the tumultuous intellectual and political climate of the times, Camus' perilous position in that culture, and the unpolished condition of the writing, his family–primarily his widow–decided not to publish the unfinished manuscript.

Camus' last work remained unpublished for 34 years, until 1994; in 1995, Knopf released David Hapsgood's translation of *The First Man* in America, complete with an "Editor's Note" by Camus' daughter Catherine, the author's "Interleaves"; "Notes and Sketches;" and two letters interchanged between Camus and his childhood instructor, Louis Germain. Although the notes which Camus left behind suggest that he was planning this work to be a much larger and more comprehensive project, readers should appreciate its directness and immediacy.

Often, Camus stylistically disguised and shadowed his personal beliefs in the earlier works, but with *The First Man*, overlooking some stylistic and structural problems with the text, readers are able to grasp some of Camus' thoughts and ideas in a direct form. Furthermore, because this novel is highly autobiographical, readers may begin to better understand the interconnections between Camus' literary, political, and philosophical ideas and his personal life as a leading Existentialist.

The First Man tells the story of Jacques Cormery, a 40 year-old man who decides to leave France for Algeria in search of information concerning his family and childhood. Through the story of Cormery's life, we might recognize Camus' life. As the childhood memories of Algeria are evoked, the hope of finding information concerning his father (who was killed in World War I) pervades Jacques' search; Jacques exists in and struggles against the silence, illiteracy, and poverty of his family. Because both Jacques and Camus grew up in fatherless and unsupportive–even destructive–conditions, each was forced to create his own strategy for survival and identity. And while Camus emphasizes the story of Jacques as an individual struggling against the indifferent society surrounding him, he also draws a clear picture of the culture of early 20th century Algeria, especially that of the working-class neighborhoods.

Students of culture will appreciate the historical and social elements of Camus' novel. And more importantly, *The First Man* offers an unguarded insights into Camus' literary, political, and philosophical credo.

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