

# The Importance of Philosophical Fiction

I must admit that I have not always been a serious reader. Like the vast majority of consumers of art, I was more interested in the [escapist element](#) of fiction and cinema. I would read a book or watch a film as a way to escape into another world for a couple hours. I was enthralled by the likes of C.S. Lewis' [The Chronicles of Narnia](#), Neil Gaiman's [The Ocean at the End of the Lane](#), and Stephen King's [The Shining](#).

And I continued along this trajectory until my best friend in college recommended that I read [The Stranger](#) by Albert Camus. It was this small piece of fiction that would forever change my understanding of fiction's supreme purpose: to make us *think*. I had never considered that fiction could, and often does, offer us a way to think about the real world. I used to think that a serious consideration of ideas could only be hashed out in journalism and academic essays. But of course, this turned out to be completely false.

I immediately latched onto *The Stranger's* main character, Meursault, a young man who has found himself passively navigating the world around him. He is not passionate about anything in life. When presented with the prospect of marriage, he merely responds with an empty "sure." The famous opening line reveals a lot about Meursault: "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know." *The Stranger* explores a life wholly consumed by indifference, even to death. Though it can be difficult to see ourselves in such an incredibly indifferent character, we can surely understand what it feels like to be indifferent toward a certain person or situation.

While this extreme form of indifference is not very realistic, it nevertheless reveals the prevalent human sentiment that

permeated post-WWII Europe. With homes, businesses, and whole cities dashed to rubble, how were people to push forward? Friends and family members had been killed, whether on the battlefield, in concentration camps, or from collateral damage from explosives. Where is God in all this? Does God even exist? These were the questions being asked at the time. The world had changed forever, and many people did not know how to feel about it. It was a time of confusion, uncertainty, fear, and paranoia.

Though *The Stranger* is still one of my favorite novels, it was just the beginning of my journey into the realm of what I refer to as *philosophical fiction*. I eventually found myself devouring Fyodor Dostoevsky's [\*Notes From the Underground\*](#). This work of philosophical fiction presents, in the form of a monologue, an impassioned case against determinism—the view that human will and desire can simply be reduced to the laws of nature.

I was then onto Franz Kafka's [\*The Metamorphosis\*](#), Jean-Paul Sartre's [\*Nausea\*](#), Knut Hamsun's [\*Hunger\*](#), Max Blecher's [\*Adventures in Immediate Irreality\*](#), and many, many more. The common element in all these works is that the world has suddenly taken on a stranger hue than we initially thought. Through this fiction, the reader is shown how complicated, cunning, and contradictory the world can be. These works transcend the political and social—they strike to the very heart of human experience.

Perhaps more important than any specific message presented in these fictional works is how they challenge us to consider that the world is not exactly what we thought it was. As Americans, we are reminded by these works that the time in which we live is exceptionally better than much of times past. We are given a unique lens through which to peer into another's life that we would not otherwise have access to. I have come to understand that one can appreciate and value a piece of writing, even if the ideas contained within the

writing do not align with my own predispositions about the world. By reading philosophical fiction, we can try to understand one another across time, space, and temperament.

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