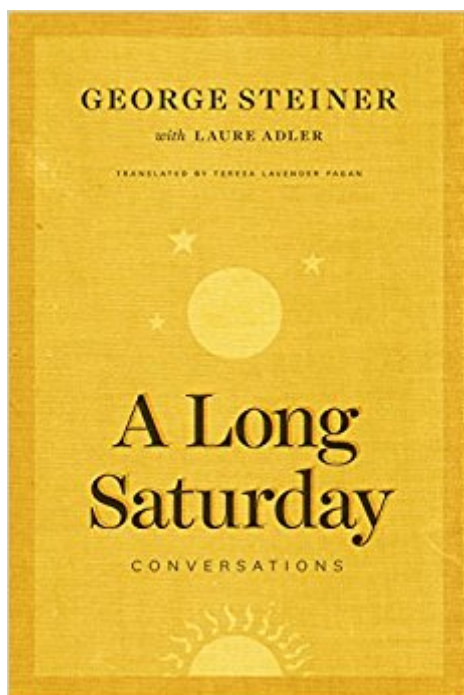


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A Long Saturday: Conversations



Synopsis

George Steiner is one of the preeminent intellectuals of our time. The Washington Post has declared that no one else “writing on literature can match him as polymath and polyglot, and few can equal the verve and eloquence of his writing,” while the New York Times says of his works that “the erudition is almost as extraordinary as the prose: dense, knowing, allusive.” Reading in many languages, celebrating the survival of high culture in the face of modern barbarisms, Steiner probes the ethics of language and literature with unparalleled grace and authority. A Long Saturday offers intimate insight into the questions that have absorbed him throughout his career. In a stimulating series of conversations, Steiner and journalist Laure Adler discuss a range of topics, including Steiner’s boyhood in Vienna and Paris, his education at the University of Chicago and Harvard, and his early years in academia. Books are a touchstone throughout, but Steiner and Adler’s conversations also range over music, chess, psychoanalysis, the place of Israel in Jewish life, and beyond. Blending thoughts on subjects of broad interest in the humanities—the issue of honoring Richard Wagner and Martin Heidegger in spite of their politics, or Virginia Woolf’s awareness of the novel as a multivocal form, for example—with personal reflections on life and family, Steiner demonstrates why he is considered one of today’s greatest minds. Revealing and exhilarating, A Long Saturday invites readers to pull up a chair and listen in on a conversation with a master.

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Customer Reviews

George Steiner is extraordinary fellow at Churchill College at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of many books, including *Martin Heidegger*, *Real Presences*, and *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.*, all also published by the University of Chicago Press. Laure Adler is a journalist and the author of several books. Teresa Lavender Fagan is a freelance translator living in Chicago.

George Steiner (b. 1929) is one of the intellectual eminences of our time. His parents were Viennese Jews who perceived the threat of Nazi anti-Semitism quite early and relocated to Paris, where George was born. The family moved again to the United States in 1940, on one of the last ships to sail to the U.S. from Genoa. Steiner received degrees from the University of Chicago and Harvard, and he attended Balliol College at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship. For two years, at the invitation of Robert Oppenheimer, he was a humanist (the very first humanist) at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, rubbing elbows with Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, John von Neumann, and the like. Since 1969 Steiner has been Extraordinary Fellow at Churchill College at Cambridge. A few years ago I read his book, *"Tolstoy or Dostoevsky"*, and found it to be the best book of literary criticism I have yet encountered. *A LONG SATURDAY* is a transcription of a series of interviews of Steiner conducted by Laure Adler in 2014. It is relaxed and wide-ranging . . . and all too short. Among the matters discussed are Steiner's youth and his time at the Advanced Institute at Princeton; Judaism and Israel; language and literature; and the "morality" (or absence thereof) of the humanities in the twentieth century. Steiner can be quite provocative, as when he theorizes on women and creativity, or explains why he is not a Zionist, or disparages Freud and psychoanalysis, or offers a defense of Martin Heidegger (for him, the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century). Perhaps the most provocative, and most important, statements in the book concern the future of European civilization and culture. Presumptuous me, I can't accept everything that Steiner dishes out, but I admire his erudition, his originality (there is not a trace of accepted orthodoxy in anything Steiner says), and his intellectual passion. Here are two of the many points I checked during my reading: * Steiner offers another perspective on C. P. Snow's bemoaning of the gulf between literary intellectuals and scientists. Steiner says, "I have the impression that there is an alarming amount of bluffing in the humanities. In mathematics or in the pure sciences you can't bluff: it's either right or it isn't. You can't cheat. * * * The moral rigor is extreme. It's a very special morality, a morality of truth." * Steiner thinks Europe "is tired". He doesn't believe that China will succeed it as the global leader of civilization and culture. There is, however, a possibility that India will, with its "fantastic

creative sensibility, its power of invention and extreme originality." As a professor, he has worked closely with Chinese and Indian students. "The Chinese learn with amazing energy, * * * but they daren't criticize, they daren't invent. When Indian students are around the table, you hear daring voices all the time, voices that dare to suggest something new, to guess, above all to say no to authority. That's why I feel that great chapters in the history of human thought and art will emerge in India." Steiner comes across as rather prickly and arrogant. I doubt that I would much enjoy having dinner with him. (But then, I doubt even more that he would enjoy my company.) Adler is a good interlocutor and sounding board. The interviews were conducted in French, and this English translation was done by Teresa Lavender Fagan. My principal complaint is that, given its price, the book is slim. My title for this review, by the way, is Steiner's paraphrase of something Martin Heidegger said. Steiner's explication, or interpretation, of Heidegger's remark may by itself make the book worth reading.

This charming extended interview appeared in a French edition in 2014. Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan, the sounds are pure Steinerian English, so the translation was very successful. The title does not refer to the time of the interview(s) but rather to the nature of human life. Steiner knows the Bible as well as an evangelical preacher (actually better than most, because he knows Greek), and though he is an agnostic/atheist, he is not only intimately familiar with religious doctrine and tradition but respectful of it to the point that in his opinion our connections with the infinite undergird all significant human action. Hence, the title: after Good Friday we await Easter Sunday, but we live on the Saturday between, fearing, hoping, suffering and striving. The general subjects of the book's sections are his early life and education (recounted elsewhere, but a fascinating story); an examination of human positioning in time, with reflections on Heidegger and on Judaism; a discussion of language; a discussion of the Bible and beyond and, finally, a consideration of the manner in which the humanities can dehumanize us (chiefly by distancing us from daily, pressing realities). It ends with some reflections on learning how to die. These are common Steinerian subjects. The one missing figure from his personal pantheon is Dante, but he discusses Celan (as always) and has some very interesting things to say about Shakespeare. He is in a generally relaxed mood, feeling the imminence of last things and death, reflecting on his increasing deafness as he talks about his love for music. The high points, particularly for those coming to his work for the first time, will be the accounts of his early life and education, his relationship with his parents, his views of prominent thinkers with whom his life intersected and his views of faith and religion. The interviewer, Laure Adler, even wheedles

from him some comments on his sexual experiences (though he has never really been shy about approaching this subject in the past). Steiner is incapable of being dull, so there is something of interest on nearly every page, but the broad outlines of his thought and experience are already well-known and we do not see the kind of epiphanies that we experience when we move from a book such as *In Bluebeard's Castle* to his later book, *Real Presences*. I am always fascinated by the overarching patterns of his thought. He considers Heidegger to be the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century (though he recognizes his personal shortcomings) and he considers Freud (and psychoanalysis) to be great frauds (though he acknowledges Freud's cultural and historical importance). I particularly liked his excoriation of so-called conceptual art and his snarky aside on Lacan's method of charging for his services. Bottom line: everything by Steiner is worthy of attention, even when it covers familiar ground. I would echo the comment of a fellow reviewer, who notes that there are long YouTube interviews with Steiner available on the internet which are quite fascinating. This is (with Frye, Crane and a handful of others) one of the greatest literary critics of the twentieth century, an individual deeply aware of music and mathematics, functioning in multiple languages and comfortable in multiple cultures.

Polymath is not too strong a word. His writing is clear and as precise as his subjects will allow. He is unfailingly interesting and, increasingly, of central importance in modern thought. Though not a philosopher per se and not a creative artist per se (though he has written verse and a very interesting novel about Hitler in the south American jungles), not a scientist per se, nor a musician, he possesses a level of knowledge and a degree of wisdom that continues to command our attention. His views of higher education (and the manner in which he exemplifies his own values) are particularly worthy of our attention. Highly recommended.

I find the book frank, vivid, lively and pretty informative. Together with his *Errata*, it provides us with an unflattering portrait of George Steiner, polymath and critic. Reading him reminds me of the fact that literary essays can be more interesting and stimulating than fiction. A must for George Steiner fan! I find myself in sympathy with what he has to say about Freud.

Classic Steiner: full of himself and full of half-baked summary judgements of everything and everyone. Thankfully brisk read, unlike his books.

A great thinker, a great interview.

If you are a fellow lonely iconoclastic autodidact you will find a friend with George Steiner. This book records a conversation with him in print but I must point the reader to a series of video interviews with him on YouTube that give this book's content all the sparkling-eyed brightness and childlike enthusiasm of Steiner's physical character. You see the wonder and joy in his eyes as he speaks. His excitement about classics and poetry and art is infectious; his interests are diverse and idiosyncratic (though he weaves the various threads together in ingenious ways). If you are seeking the living image of the Socratic intellectual ideal—à la Montaigne for the 20th century—read (and preferably watch) George Steiner.

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