



Strangers to Ourselves

Julia Kristeva (Translation) , Leon S. Roudiez (Translator) , Leon Roudiez (Translator)

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This book is concerned with the notion of the "stranger" -the foreigner, outsider, or alien in a country and society not their own- as well as the notion of strangeness within the self -a person's deep sense of being, as distinct from outside appearance and their conscious idea of self.

Kristeva begins with the personal and moves outward by examining world literature and philosophy. She discusses the foreigner in Greek tragedy, in the Bible, and in the literature of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the twentieth century. She discusses the legal status of foreigners throughout history, gaining perspective on our own civilization. Her insights into the problems of nationality, particularly in France are more timely and relevant in an increasingly integrated and fractious world.

Strangers to Ourselves Details

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From Reader Review Strangers to Ourselves for online ebook

Sophie says

College professor study on what it means to be a stranger... Philosophically and in mythology and literature. Did not like the introduction at all... Have paused, not sure I will resume.

Mike says

A book that is at once highly acute and powerful in places and one that is myopic and lacking for scope and detail in other sections, but altogether, a very necessary book: Kristeva examines what it means to be a "stranger" or alien in another land, and as someone who came to Paris from her native Bulgaria as a graduate student, as someone who is both a linguist and a psychoanalyst (and maintains an active clinical practice), Kristeva is in a great place in so many ways to consider the plight of the stranger in a strange land.

The opening section "Toccata and Fugue for the Foreigner" is widely anthologized and a great piece of writing that can stand on its own while the chapter on Paul and Augustine is also very good. Where Kristeva is less skilled is when she speaks of our contemporary times (or, at least, the times a few decades ago when the book was written): she seems to embark from her personal journey with the view her own experience can well stand in for the experience of any and every foreigner. Also, she tilts her earlier arguments towards promoting a European Union-like unity of all nations and peoples which may sound nice in a Disney sort of way on the surface but is ungainly in the scope of this book. Even if you side 100% with her on her politics, Kristeva interjects them in a rather unbecoming manner in this volume. She simply toys with ideas that deserve far more development than she's willing or able to provide them—if they are to make sense and be winning arguments.

That said, Kristeva often shines—as in the first section or her consideration of Rabelais and the Renaissance. She is able to pin down a lot of diverse places in history where elements came together in a manner to promote a wider view of who and what is "foreign" and who and what is domestic and also does a good job explaining the French mindset of national polity and expansion. There are though places where this book never measures up to the greatness you'd expect from Kristeva on this topic. Like all her works, if your French is up for it, read it in the original French.

Laura C. R'lyeh says

Kristeva profundiza en la noción del extranjero en un libro precioso pero desparejo. Sus reflexiones están muy bellamente expuestas, sobre todo en los primeros capítulos, en los que aborda diferentes temas relacionados con el "sentir migrante" a través de una prosa que se aleja de la frialdad académica para intimar más con el lector (que se presupone también extranjero, claro que no es requisito obligatorio para disfrutar del texto). Sin embargo, esta subjetividad inicial, que para mí era gran parte del atractivo del libro, va perdiendo fuerza en cuanto entramos al recorrido histórico y Kristeva como migrante pasa a un segundo plano. Más allá de este desequilibrio, me ha resultado una lectura interesante, reveladora por momentos (el capítulo de Freud), y -esto ya es más personal - también muy balsámica. La recomiendo.

Reuben says

It's very late and I am incredibly tired so in lieu of a proper review I'll bullet point some thoughts:

--The cover is horrible, but is conversely also what drew me to the book.

--The bulk of this book is a whistle-stop tour of history with each chunk being analysed for how its particular time/locale treated the concept of foreigners. This is without a doubt interesting, but it does not give Kristeva a lot of room to develop her over-arching thesis. I was left feeling lost by the pertinence of some sections in relation to her point.

--Kristeva's prose ranges from poignant to infuriatingly vague and there doesn't seem to be a decent calculus for exactly when or why this is the case. Certain sections, mostly in the historical chunk of the work, used such puffed up vocabulary that it took far longer than should have been needed for me to tease out exactly what was being said.

--Ultimately I am left unconvinced by Kristeva's conflation of geographic foreigners, cultural others, political dissenters and Freud's concept of the uncanny. At one point she goes on to posit how the foreigner can only be negatively described: as a series of what he is not, what language he does not speak, where he does not come from etc. In doing so, the remit of exactly what Kristeva is talking about is widened to include essentially anything resembling the concept of "otherness". She then pulls this together by suggesting that this otherness is projected from our own psychological sense of insecurity onto other people, and by doing so everybody becomes a foreigner. This point seems completely non-sequitur to the preceding work, and is rested upon a foundation of Kristeva's subjective feelings and infallible conjecturing about psychoanalysis.

--The best part by far is the tracking of cosmopolitanism and foreignness throughout the French revolutionary period. But this serves more as political history than as a substantive piece of philosophy.

--Ultimately, interesting book, but mostly in its peripheral elements (of which there are many). The main thesis is neatly-wrapped but nonetheless fails to surmount speciousness.

Carolyn says

A sad sack of induction fallacies. It horrifies me to hear Kristeva's woebegone personal experiences projected into vague half-truths about the identity of the immigrant populace. Her positioning of the foreigner as an Abject entity holds these people in bad faith, with the discourse of this novel only limiting the potential of the immigrant as a viable and autonomous entity. Furthermore, constant citations of the Ancient Greek philosophic greats is grating and unoriginal. I shut this book with a sour face.

Leonard Pierce says

Kristeva's meditation on the foreigner as a double of our own inner self isn't as lively and precise as some of her best work, but it's still very perceptive and worth a read. The notion that the foreigner returns to us as a

dark reflection of our inner being, and that we can only love or hate them to the degree that we accept or reject ourselves, is supported by many examples from antiquity to the modern era (most especially, and obviously, Camus and Sartre). There's a final section, seemingly as relevant today as it was when she wrote the book almost 30 years ago, about the new wave of migrants to France, and concerns about assimilation, that she incorporates into her thesis. This all gets a bit abstract, and the language isn't as commanding as "Powers of Horror", largely thanks to a lot more psychoanalytical notions and jargon, but when she comes closest to the subject, you're still seeing an amazing mind at work.

Erdem Tasdelen says

The problem that I had with this book is that it takes what appears to be a personal experience and universalizes that experience as one of all foreigners. The language that is employed here almost seems like it would work better as an autobiography or fiction.

The historical facts given work as a survey of the notion of the stranger/foreigner throughout centuries, but the first chapter, which is the account of what the foreigner experiences in the contemporary world, is very detached from the rest of the book. As charming as it may be to read about how the perception of the foreigner has kept changing in history, it fails to shed light on the current agenda.

The last two chapters of the book focus on a political solution that derives from psychoanalysis, stating that with Freud's notion of the uncanny, one realizes the strangeness of oneself. The result is thus a utopian wish for individuals to situate themselves as foreigners to themselves, the result of which is to embrace other individuals on account of this realization. There remains yet another point of doubt here for one who is skeptic of psychoanalysis. I am not convinced that emancipation for immigrants and exiles will be achieved through acceptance of psychoanalytic discourse.

Kay says

Being an outsider and knowing what happens with tribal issues of acceptance of those like me, I love the revelation of Kristeva's exploration of otherness and feel validated for the first time.

Maksym Karpovets says

One of the most popular Kristeva's book is discovering the question of identity. Today this question might be felled of empty determinations. Who am I? How could I behave? These problems were asked by ancient philosophers, but in modern culture they are essential again (as every fundamental issue). Reading this book I couldn't really found out the fundamental answers. It seems that Kristeva deeply understands the meaning of question and she also correctly asks us about identity. But farther and farther it gets harder to understand where she sees the possible answers.

The most interesting sections of this work are the earliest chapters. Kristeva seems to run out of steam and stop abruptly once she begins to discuss foreignness and strangeness in contemporary culture. She analyzes her own experience in France and says that not really feels like at home. There is a closed cycle: she doesn't feel at home outside of France. That's why she emphasizes the main core of her book: we are strangers for

ourselves in this world (in a way of existentialism, especially it reminds Søren Kierkegaard). Kristeva writes: *Free of ties with his own people, the foreigner feels “completely free”. Nevertheless, the consummate name of such freedom is solitude.*

In this case it helpfully to read the Chapter 4 *Knowing who we are* where Kristeva tries to understand not only cultural or social roots of our identity, but tries to examine ontological basis of it. The main thesis of this and next chapters is that we are often wrong about why we do something and even about how we felt. The author reminds us about Cartesian tradition of subject and its feelings. But I don't think that is right step of analysis, because it goes away to abstract concepts from the main problem. I absolutely understand this logic and if I had a chance to write this research I'd do it in the same way. Yet, I guess it is the wrong way where have been fully crashed many modern projects (include the project of identity).

This book has helped me to realize how extremely we depend from our cultural background. When we try to run away from our culture we must rebuild not only *ourselves*, but also *others*. And every time it looks like endless game with mirrors.

Anna Puleo says

Forse ha ragione Marcel Proust quando afferma che l'opera letteraria non è altro che uno strumento ottico che consente al lettore di focalizzare e leggere meglio la realtà. Libri che ti trovi davanti più o meno per caso nei quali cerchi di trovare qualche risposta alle tue domande..

I morti di Parigi, come quelli di Ankara, di Beirut, di Aleppo, deflagrano ancora in me e sento il bisogno di dare forma all'angoscia e alla pena. Inizio a leggere i giornali, a scrivere e a cancellare quel che ho scritto, che avverto irrimediabilmente banale e inadeguato rispetto a quello che stiamo vivendo.

Riprendo in mano *Stranieri a noi stessi*, un classico della letteratura interculturale, ripubblicato ad oltre 25 anni di distanza da Donzelli con una bella introduzione dell'autrice, nel quale Julia Kristeva interroga il significato di straniero nella cultura occidentale.

Tema indubbiamente impervio da esplorare, che ci mette di fronte a pulsioni ancestrali, alla diffidenza e alla paura di fronte all'Altro. Che non riguarda naturalmente solo identità geografiche e culturali diverse, ma anche la nostra irriducibile estraneità a noi stessi. Non solo chi vive da straniero in un altro Paese ma anche chi è straniero tra i suoi simili e lo straniero che abita in noi, senza il cui riconoscimento <>.

Julia Kristeva, bulgara trapiantata in Francia, americana d'adozione, che si definisce oggi “cittadina europea”, semiologa, psicanalista, filosofa, scrittrice (*I Samurai*, *Sole nero*, *L'avvenire di una rivolta*) cerca di restituirne la profondità, la complessità, la molteplicità dei piani di riflessione, partendo

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