

## **The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I-II**

*Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn , Thomas P. Whitney (Translator)*

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It is a question if any work of literature in our era other than *The Divine Comedy* is commensurate with *The Gulag Archipelago* in structure, scale, multiplicity of incident and characters, emotional range, variety of inflection and, above all, in the staggering magnitude of its underlying concept.

In this masterpiece, the author of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The First Circle* has orchestrated thousands of incidents and individual histories into one narrative of unflagging power and momentum. Written in a tone that encompasses Olympian wrath, bitter calm, savage irony and sheer comedy, it combines history, autobiography, documentary and political analysis as it examines in its totality the Soviet apparatus of repression from its inception following the October revolution of 1917.

The "Archipelago" of Mr. Solzhenitsyn's work is the network of secret police installations, camps, prisons, transit centers, communications facilities, transportation systems and espionage organizations which, in his view, honeycombs the length and breadth of the Soviet Union.

Drawing on his own experience, material from Soviet archives, cases collected during his eleven years of labor camps and exile, and the evidence of more than 200 fellow prisoners, Mr. Solzhenitsyn concludes that the secret police are the vital element of the Soviet regime, and have been ever since its founding by Lenin.

Numerous studies of the Soviet system of control have been published in the West but until now nothing so complete, so carefully documented and assembled, and never before has a literary giant devoted his gifts of narrative and characterization to the enterprise. Solzhenitsyn has here created and peopled with brilliantly portrayed human beings a vast, overarching fresco of that state within a state which is the Gulag Archipelago.

*(Taken from the inside jacket material of the Harper & Row First Edition of 1973)*

## The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I-II Details

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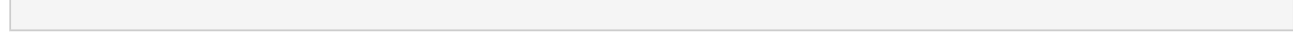
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# **From Reader Review The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I-II for online ebook**

## **Jennifer says**

One of the most intensely human books I have read in a long time - which is the exact opposite of what I had expected. Why? Because this is a treatise cataloguing a crushing system of tyranny and brutality. It painstakingly details systematic DEhumanization... AND YET what the book is really about are the zeks within the system and their ability to find spiritual strength and dignity in the abyss. In the utter ABYSS.

Richly illustrated, brilliantly written. It is a full, captivating, meticulously researched memoir. This is the very best art.

Also, this was only volume one of three and it got wildly good at the end.  
I'm not stopping.

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## **Yeison J. Seijas says**

Esta obra es una documentación monumental sobre los campos de trabajo forzoso donde recluían a los prisioneros durante la era soviética, principalmente en el régimen de Stalin. Trabajo que le hizo vale el premio Nobel en literatura a su autor

Dos cosas me están llamando full la atención de este libro:

Primero lo demencial que fue ese episodio, ósea se habla de que 15% de la población de la URSS fue a parar a esos campos, por motivos no precisamente políticos, sino por una especie de psicopatía del régimen soviético.

El autor narra que a la gente la arrestaban por x motivo, por ejemplo: si un trabajador llegaba tarde al trabajo lo acusaban de conspirar contra la patria y lo metían preso, si veías feo a un funcionario igual, si caminaba por el carril derecho lo acusaban de derechista lo metían preso y pal Gulag. Así tal cual lo describe el autor, que por ciento vivió en carne propia la reclusión en el Gulag, pero su sarcasmo en realidad busca no atiborrar tanto al lector del montón de calamidades que narra, por tanto, aun cuando es un libro duro, su lectura se hace amena.

-Por cierto, según muchos autores, detrás de los Gulag y los arrestos masivos, el régimen soviético lo que buscaba era esclavizar una gran cantidad de ciudadanos para poner a funcionar a lo arrecho ciertos sectores económicos de esa nación ante el desastroso modelo comunista que ya para esa fecha empezaba a mostrar sus estragos-

Lo segundo es que, es imposible no sentirse familiarizado con todo ese relato de horror, de persecuciones y éxodos masivo que relata el autor y sobretodo con los hdp responsables de todo ese drama.

Como comente es una obra enorme (me estoy leyendo el primer volumen y son 800 paginas, le siguen 2 más de igual extensión) pero de lectura full recomendada, sobre todo para aquellos que aun dudan en que el comunismo ha sido la peor lacra que le ha pasado a la humanidad.

Hay un episodio que vale la pena comentar de Archipiélago Gulag

En una conferencia en honor a Stalin ocurrió un episodio donde los asistentes duraron más de quince minutos de ovación al terminar el evento, la razón no fue precisamente por entusiasmo sino porque todos tenían miedo en ser el primero en dejar de aplaudir. Hasta que unos de los asistentes ya reventado se dejó caer en el asiento, acto seguido el estruendo de aplausos paro en seco.

En la noche, ese señor que había sido el primero en dejar de aplaudir lo arrestaron y condenaron a 10 años en los Gulag por un motivo que se sacaron del forro, más cuando el tipo se retiraba tras recibir su sentencia, el juez le reprocho "nunca sea el primero en dejar de aplaudir"

Así de demencial era el régimen de Stalin. Ni Orwell en 1984 lo hubiera descrito tan macabro.

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## Antof9 says

A story I've told more than a few times: when Mr. Solzhenitsyn died in 2008, I thought that an appropriate time to read this book. So I took it with me on a business trip (I found a receipt in the book from 8/19/2008) and read quite a bit of it with much interest. I was so wrapped up in the book, in fact, that I was surprised when I felt the plane begin to slow down. "Could we already be to Newark? Gosh, that seemed like a short trip." In fact, when I looked out the window, we were slowing down over Chicago. We flew out over Lake Michigan (I was convinced the pilot wanted to crash the plane in an unpopulated area) and circled all the way up to Milwaukee. Turns out we were burning up fuel before an emergency landing with more emergency vehicles than I have ever seen at a single airport. I knew it was scary when the man next to me pulled out his BlackBerry, turned it on (not even trying to hide it), and sent an "I love you" message to his wife and kids.

In the end, we landed safely, but I have learned that an emergency landing does not make for calm. And sadly, it turned me off this book. I've had it on my "currently reading" list ever since then, and from time to time picked it up to read a page or two, but then put it down due to lack of interest. And here's the thing about me (for which my friend Karm said I need counselling): there are some books I Just. Will. Not. Stop. Reading. For one thing, I was halfway through it. And I had liked (?) what I had read up until the point I thought I was going to die. For another thing, I subscribe to the theory that some books and movies are just *important*. You know? It's just important that we read them - to know, to learn ... so we don't forget, and always remember. I call these books "principle books". And so it was for all these reasons (and more) that I thought I should finish this. I mean, these people lived and died in the Gulag, for crying out loud. Certainly I could read about it in my comfy chair in my comfy home.

So I thought that once I finally finished, my book review would literally be "I'm done!" Or I might possibly write a few words on people who say "The Ukraine" vs. "Ukraine" (this book says "The Ukraine" but when my parents lived there, they were taught "Ukraine", and at book club the other night, one of the girls brilliantly deduced that it used to be a region, and this was probably written during that time; hence "the"). One other thing to fill a book review -- a word that neither Google nor my dictionary recognized! I even blogged about "gaybisty" here (note to self: when you come across a word you don't recognize, check the translator's notes at the back of the book first).

Anyway, I hadn't marked anything in the book (other than "gaybisty") of note for a review until I got to this text:

Let history say how true or untrue that reproach is. However, no one paid for hunger strikes so much and so grievously as the Trotskyites. (We will come to their hunger strikes and their strikes in camps in Part III.)

... and all I could think was, "despite your brilliantly worded 'teaser', I'm still not reading the rest of this! When I'm done with this book, I'm DONE!" But something happened shortly after that. I became interested again. I'm as surprised as you are! But I did become more invested in the book. I'll never say I loved it, or foist it on someone by telling them they *must* read it, but I made my peace with it. The surprising part about becoming interested in it again is that I then -- as per usual -- started marking spots I wanted to quote later.

In discussing the prisoner-transport convoys, how people were divided up, etc., he makes this observation (which I have no idea if it is true, but nonetheless is something to ponder): "After all, was it because Pontius Pilate wanted to humiliate him that Christ was crucified between two thieves? It just happened to be crucifixion day that day -- and there was only one Golgotha, and time was short. And so *he was numbered with the transgressors.*"

In the discussion of hiding large groups of people from those not imprisoned, I found this passage extremely moving:

The preparation of the train has been completed -- and ahead lies the complicated combat operation of *loading* the prisoners into the cars. At this point there are two important and obligatory *objectives*:

1. to conceal the loading from ordinary citizens
2. to terrorize the prisoners

To conceal the loading from the local population was necessary because approximately a thousand people were being loaded on the train simultaneously (at least twenty-five cars), and this wasn't your little group from a Stolypin that could be led right past the townspeople. Everyone knew of course, that arrests were being made every day and every hour, but no one was to be horrified by the sight of large numbers of them *together*. In Orel in 1938 you could hardly hide the fact that there was no home in the city where there hadn't been arrests, and weeping women in their peasant carts blocked the square in front of the Orel Prison ... But you don't need to show our Soviet people an entire trainload of them collected in one day.

And then there is a simple quote in the midst of the description of people wanting to get from the train (miserable) to the camp (surely it will be better!): "A human being is all hope and impatience." Loved that!

I follow that with one of the most sad quotes in the book. He is talking about a group of prisoners from Minusinsk - he doesn't/can't even identify the year more than it was sometime in the 1940s, and he describes them having been deprived of fresh air for a whole year ... followed by being forced to walk in formation for FIFTEEN miles on foot to Abakan. He says, "About a dozen of them died along the way. And no one is ever going to write a great novel about it, not even one chapter" Because (and this breaks my heart): *if you live in a graveyard, you can't weep for everyone.*

So now I'm done -- finally -- and honestly? Even though I said I wasn't going to read volume or part III or whatever it's called, I might. I'm glad to have read this, and probably the biggest surprise was his sarcastic

sense of humor. But now I'm done and I'd be lying if I didn't say I was THRILLED!

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## **Pinkyivan says**

This is the review for only the first volume, I'll review the other two.

It's hard to choose a starting point for this review as it is one of the most interesting literary experiments I know of. It is a mixture of Solzhenitsyn's own thoughts on various subjects which are not quite philosophy, but are certainly philosophical, his reflections on what it was like going through the process of being sent to a gulag (by the end he is still in a transitory prison) and a detailed history of the Soviet judicial system. It's comparable to 2666 in a way, where seemingly endless mock trials and various other situations related to how to get to a gulag. And there are many. They almost become dreary, again similar to Bolano, but instead of a detached tone you always get his humorous comments on completely absurd events which creates a dark comedy out of the undoubtedly darkest time in human history.

Reading authors like Kafka or Dick who lived in very ordered and mostly fair systems and being as pessimistic as they were almost seems like a joke, compared to Gulag Archipelago, where all the absurdity you can find in those two is recorded, plain and simple, as another record in history. 30000 Czech were sent to the gulag because you couldn't really prove there weren't any spies amongst them, hundreds of engineers were executed because they held the opinion that the railroad cannot really carry more than x tons or because they built high ceilings for factories to make the conditions more humane, the leader of a factory who betrayed the Union because he simply couldn't imagine a communist economy winning against the Germans. Of course some 150 pages are devoted to ways of torture, which went from good cop bad cop, water torture, sleep deprivation, stuffing 100 or so people to 35 m<sup>2</sup>, giving water only 4 times a week because that way you wouldn't have to take them to the toilet, to simply crushing their testicles.

Human fates are told, even a lot of very simple, but touching or saddening interactions between fellow inmates, and most importantly, the effects of a purely secular ideology are shown.

In short, this can be described as an epic, an achievement in all areas a writer can hope to touch, paralleled by very few authors.

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## **Buck says**

I went for a walk this afternoon, strolling around the unfamiliar student district near Chosun University. It was pleasant just to be out and about, looking at stuff, breathing in air lightly spiced with the peculiar sewage-and-market smells of urban Korea. As I often do, I stopped off at a café, where I sat and dicked around on my iPad for an hour. Then I came home and put on a load of laundry. And that was about it.

Is my itinerary of any conceivable interest to anyone? Hardly. But listen now: in the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*, it's recorded that a certain Cheka interrogator used to line up naked prisoners, make them bend over, and then deliver flying 'football kicks' to their exposed testicles. Solzhenitsyn says the men usually passed out from the pain.

I don't know if there's a lesson here, other than the usual one about the everlasting shittiness of our species. But I choose to take a very simple message away from this story: any day on which your testicles are not being used for soccer practice is probably, on the whole, a pretty good one. That may sound horribly flippant, but Solzhenitsyn himself makes a similar point elsewhere in the book, claiming that it was precisely his years in the camps that gave him access to the miracle of normalcy, of mundanity.

So coming back to my blah, unblogworthy day: this quotidian bullshit—wandering around, drinking coffee, downloading sitcoms from iTunes—this is what it's *supposed* to be like. This is fucking felicity. That vague, low-level dread you feel is just the background hum of a healthy, contented existence.

Hmm. The phrase 'count your blessings' seems to hover here. Have I just taken the scenic route to a cliché? Looks that way. I need to read more Kierkegaard.

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## Edward says

Πολλοί αναγνώστες το συγκρίνουν με τις Ιστορίες απ' την Κολιμή, του Βαράμ Σαλμοφ. Γεγονός είναι ότι πραγματεύονται το ίδιο θέμα, έχουν τον χαρακτήρα του βιβλίου-ντοκουμέντου, απ'ρροια των προσωπικών βιωμάτων που φέρουν οι συγγραφείς απ' τη διαμονή τους στα στρατιωτικά εργαστήρια της Σιβηρίας. Το βιβλίο του Σοζεντσίβ, να ταξιδι στο σκοτεινό παρελθόν, αποτελεί χροίος προς τους χιλιάδες ανθρώπους που έφησαν την τελευταία τους πνοή στα γκολαγκ της αχανούς Ρωσικής ενδοχώρας. Είναι ένα καλό μύθημα ιστορίας, μια εκτενής μελέτη για τα ήρια της ανθρώπινης θηριωδίας. Η ιστορική επιβεβαίωση του Homo Homini Lupus.. Αποκαλυπτικό βιβλίο, χαρακτηρίζεται απ' λογοτεχνική αρτιότητα, που χροίει ιδιαίτερης προσοχής.

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## Virgil says

This is not an easy read, and nor was it ever meant to be. It was originally written in Russian for Russians, and the odd sensibilities and colloquialisms that irritate many of my fellow Anglophones reflect this fact. It's extremely dense, and I probably won't get to the other four parts in the near future. However, anyone with an interest in the history of Communism, the Soviet Union, or political repression in general should read it. Yes, it's tedious, and it is tough going if you've never taken a course in Russian or Soviet history (you quickly discover that the glossary in back exists for a reason). However, if you manage to finish, you'll know more than you could ever imagine on the subject, and be left with a chilling knowledge of how ordinary, good people subject themselves to tyranny and become participants in this vicious system. Considering how difficult it was for Solzhenitzyn to research publish this book, I can understand why he chose to cram as much information as possible in the text. As he says, he felt the responsibility to speak not only for himself, but also for the millions not living and otherwise silenced. The vast scale of the entire "Gulag Archipelago" tells much about how seriously Solzhenitzyn took this responsibility.

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## El says

Sometimes (like today) when I have had a really long day at work, and nothing seems to be quite going my way, or I'm verbally assaulted by one or more parties, or I have to do too much math and my brain melts a little, I think that the idea of being in the Gulag sounds pretty nice right now.

Of course I'm not serious, and if you think I am, you shouldn't be reading my reviews.

But on days like today where it just doesn't seem like things could get much worse, it's hard *not* to think of Solzhenitsyn and his imprisonment. Sure, I think I have it bad at times, but that's only because I've never



been imprisoned in any facility, let alone in the Soviet Gulag. I don't need to read certain books to put things in perspective, but I never turn down an opportunity to look at life through someone else's eyes.

What's especially crazy to me is that this volume only contained Parts I and II. There are two other volumes, all of which are of relatively the same length as this first one. It's not so much that they're *long*, but they're really fucking heavy. You read over 600 pages of eyewitness accounts, personal experiences, trial information, torture techniques, and political savagery, and then tell me what you feel like doing is flying a fucking kite. It's exhausting to read this, and I'm not even halfway through his "literary investigations". This, of course, excites me to no end - there's so much Solzhenitsyn to read! Whee!

I've had this with me on the bus, to and from work, on my lunch breaks, and geez. It's amazing I could even muster the strength to get out of bed in the morning. The realization that there are/were people in the world that do/did treat other people in such manners is inexplicable. Additionally crazy to me is that these pages were never meant to be read outside the samizdat. Turns out that the lady Solzhenitsyn entrusted with his work succumbed to authorities and handed it over to them. And then she killed herself because she couldn't live with the guilt of what she had done. Crazy world in which we live.

This is powerful stuff, and hard to capture in a review. Solzhenitsyn said it all best; following this review are passages I've been adding as I've read because they impacted me in some way, or I found them especially interesting, or they mentioned works of art that I looked up and wanted to include for reference. I don't know that I can recommend *The Gulag Archipelago* to everyone - it's not for those with weak stomachs or especially sensitive. Luckily for me I'm not *too* sensitive and I can read about one getting their balls crushed while eating my lunch. Otherwise I'm not sure I would have made it through.

### ***Chapter 3: The Interrogation***

If the intellectuals in the plays of Chekhov who spent all their time guessing what would happen in twenty, thirty, or forty years had been told that in forty years interrogation by torture would be practiced in Russia; that prisoners would have their skulls squeezed within iron rings; that a human being would be lowered into an acid bath; that they would be trussed up naked to be bitten by ants and bedbugs; that a ramrod heated over a primus stove would be thrust up their anal canal (the "secret brand"); that a man's genitals would be slowly crushed beneath the toe of a jackboot; and that, in the luckiest possible circumstances, prisoners would be tortured by being kept from sleeping for a week, by thirst, and by being beaten to a bloody pulp, not one of Chekhov's plays would have gotten to its end because all the heroes would have gone off to insane asylums. (p 93)

...until, in the fourth month, all the notebooks of my "War Diary" were cast into the hellish maw of the Lubyanka furnace, where they burst into flame - the red pyre of one more novel which had perished in Russia - and flew out of the highest chimney in black butterflies of soot. (p 136)

### ***Chapter 5: First Cell, First Love***

What is the right course of action if our mother has sold us to the gypsies? No, even worse, thrown us to the dogs? Does she really remain our mother? If a wife has become a whore, are you really still bound to her in fidelity? A Motherland that betrays its soldiers - is that really a Motherland? (p 219-20)

### ***Chapter 10: The Law Matures***

One little note on eight-year-old Zoya Vlasova. She loved her father intensely. She could no longer go to school. (They teased her: "Your papa is a wrecker!" She would get in a fight: "My papa is good!") She lived only one year after the trial. Up to then she had never been ill. During that year *she did not once smile*; she went about with head hung low, and the old women prophesied: "She keeps looking at the earth; she is going to die soon." She died of inflammation of the brain, and as she was dying she kept calling out: "Where is my papa? Give me my papa!" When we count up the millions of those who perished in the camps, we forget to multiply them by two, by three. (p 431)

### ***Chapter 12: Tyurzak***

When, in 1960, Gennady Smelov, a nonpolitical offender, declared a lengthy hunger strike in the Leningrad prison, the prosecutor went to his cell for some reason (perhaps he was making his regular rounds) and asked him: "Why are you torturing yourself?"

And Smelov replied: "Justice is more precious to me than life."

This phrase so astonished the prosecutor with its irrelevance that the very next day Smelov was taken to the Leningrad Special Hospital (ie, the insane asylum) for prisoners. And the doctor there told him:

"We suspect you may be a schizophrenic." (p 473)

### ***Chapter 1 (Part II): The Ships of the Archipelago***

The painting by Yaroshenko which everyone knows, *Life Is Everywhere*, shows a fourth-class passenger car re-equipped in every naive fashion for prisoner transport... (p 491)

### ***Chapter 3 (Part II): The Slave Caravan***

In Orel in 1938 you could hardly hide the fact that there was no home in the city where there hadn't been arrests, and weeping women in their peasant carts blocked the square in front of the Orel Prison just as in Surikov's painting, *The Execution of the Streltsy*. (p 567)

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## **Anastasija says**

This book should be the bible for those who keep praising Soviet Union. It should finally open their eyes. And if this book wouldn't be able to do it, I'm afraid, nothing would.

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## **Clif says**

Prison in a civilized society should be limited to setting apart those who would be a threat to others if allowed freedom. They should not be deprived beyond this. There should be regular meals, exercise and

diversions such as TV and reading. Humanity should not end at a prison gate because a prisoner is still human. Though there are countries that practice this, for most societies prison is a place for punishment right up to torture regardless of all the evidence that it is counterproductive.

Right now, the United States has a record percentage of its population in prison after a determined drive by those eager to punish those who behave in ways that offend society at large, those who have been caught with drugs being particular targets. Objections are always being made that U.S. prisons are too comfortable, that there should be more deprivation. Let's make them pay!

It is important to read *The Gulag Archipelago* because it shows how far a country can go in punishing people not only for physical crimes such as burglary and assault, but for expressing objections to the government or powerful people within it. It goes beyond that to condemnation merely for being accused of something regardless of what a person has actually said or done. Anyone can be put in the gulag for virtually any reason and without any chance of a fair trial, often with no defense allowed or no trial at all. At the top of it all for many years was Joseph Stalin who could condemn anyone and did not hesitate to put hundreds of thousands away. As President Trump speaks of the press as "the enemy of the people" it is chilling to know that this accusation is exactly what many were imprisoned for in the gulag.

If so many people are imprisoned then why not have them work on national projects for no pay? In fact it was to create work camps that the gulag was established. Why spend money on food and shelter for them? Cram people into work camps where labor has no reward, shelter is in rooms jammed with filthy bedbug ridden bunks and you can easily die from disease or malnutrition. Need to go to the bathroom? Only once a day. The only difference between the gulag and Hitler's concentration camps was that the latter had death for the prisoners as a goal in itself with no pretense of a term that could be served out.

As a survivor of eleven years in the gulag, Solzhenitsyn wrote this book to document the details of the system. There is more than enough physical and psychological agony in this book to make the reader wonder how it could be borne.

What the author reveals is a new appreciation of life that can never be known to those in freedom. With everything denied, cruelty from the guards daily and no choice about what one can do, all that remains is the interaction with fellow prisoners as a source of mental stimulation and even joy. What are you in for? What is your life story? Do you know Ivan Z, Vladimir X or Boris Y? Do you know anything about some field of knowledge? Tell me all about it! Let me teach you what I know in exchange.

This humanity stripped of all pretension is what keeps the prisoners alive in their hopeless situation. I once worked with a Russian emigre who told me of his life in the USSR not as a prisoner, but simply as a citizen who, like everyone else, had few material things and was powerless to change things for the better. He told me that the joy in life came from community, from small gatherings of friends who would talk late into the night about anything and everything, each giving the other a sense of value and respect. He spoke of this bond with such affection, such nostalgia, that I couldn't help but envy him this sense of life so close to others that in our individual lives of material plenty in America we do not experience.

This experience of joy in absolute adversity is the soul of this book. Is there something about the Russians? If you have read Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky you know their unparalleled ability to examine the human heart. Solzhenitsyn follows on that path. For all that we praise individualism in America, this book tells us that stripped of everything we believe we must have to be happy, salvation can be found in the other.

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## Whitaker says

This work is not simply a testament and memorial to the victims of the Gulag, it is also a testament to Solzhenitsyn's courage and righteous anger. That he was once a victim of Gulag himself only underlines that courage, for he could easily have gone back in again for writing this testimonial. And while current figures (1.5 – 2 million) for the numbers of those who died in the Gulag are much less than those estimated by Solzhenitsyn in this book, it still boggles the imagination to think that, as many words that this three volume work contains, they still do not equal the number of people who died in the Gulag.

The three volumes take the reader sequentially through the suffering imposed on these victims. The first book takes you from the dreaded midnight knock on the door; through to the arrest, the interrogation, and the sentence; and ends with the transport to the Gulag itself. The second book details the life of suffering in the Gulag, and we hear accounts from all sides: the men, women, and children(!!??) who were its victims; the stoolies and trusties, who sold out to the regime in order to survive; he even has one chapter on the guards. The last book sets out escape attempts, rebellions, and finally exile at the end of sentence, for it turns out that release did not mean a return to normal life but being shoved into further punishment.

The darkest heart of the book is the constant reminder that people did this to people. It wasn't just the guards and officials that heaped suffering and death on so many, it was the rest of the population that was either content to ignore the massive cruelty being perpetrated in their name or too afraid to protest for fear that they would be next. Solzhenitsyn excoriates himself and his compatriots for their self-satisfied cowardice and smugness, all too sure that it couldn't happen to them until it did.

It's depressing and terrifying to read the reaction of those directly involved in the system towards Solzhenitsyn's publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. How they bristled, convinced to their very core that what they did was right. And that's probably the greatest tragedy of all: in the name of the greater good, convinced of our own purity, we can be so ready to perpetrate the greatest evils.

Other than historical interest, what reason can one have to read this work? Well, I come back to it being a testament and memorial to the suffering of Gulag's victims. You hear their voices here in this work as Solzhenitsyn quotes, cites, and refers liberally to their stories. However, for an even more compelling reason, at least for me, I come back to those who looked away or who actively wielded the lash. It was for the reminder that I too can be just as guilty of self-satisfied smugness, and for the warning that it is only too easy for me to condemn those I despise. For more than anything else, this book must serve to warn each of us of this danger or we will live to see the Gulag's savagery repeated again and again.

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## John says

This is the kind of book that is talked about, and quoted more often than it is read. In God's providence, Solzhenitsyn was arrested and spent years in the Gulag. What miserable irony that a man of Solzhenitsyn's literary talent spent time in the Gulag allowing him to expose the horrors of Soviet communism to the world.

This book is an important testament to the wicked ideology of communism. It is clear from this first volume alone that Soviet communism was a far greater evil than the Nazism of Hitler. The Soviet system idolized collective humanity and the result was a system that dehumanized individual human beings.

There are two additional books which I hope to read in the coming year. I am grateful that a man with Solzhenitsyn's talents lived through the Gulag in order to preserve its memory for future generations. May it be a testament to the evil in the hearts of all men.

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### **Gwen says**

Although this was really tough to slog through, by its end, I'm on the edge of my seat to read more. I hadn't known this was a seven part work, encapsulated in three volumes. I agree with another reviewer--it is hard to rate this (volume 1) with a certain number of stars, the implication being that everyone should read it--this is not your pollyanna bedtime story. But it is such an IMPORTANT work. Thank you to those who've translated it and distributed it. I hope all who value the first volume go on to learn the rest of--no, the ongoing, story of Russia and its systems. I'm looking for it in AIS's other works. But so far, this first volume is very very timely for our own country's frightening sense of direction.

Most moving for me and downright poetic is the passage in the last chapter entitled "From Island to Island" about the rare special-convoy trips between prisons. Special-convoys are hardly "distinguished from free travel. Only a few prisoners are delivered in this way" and only with high-official supersecret authorization. Our prisoner is accompanied by only two jailers, who are actually polite with their threats of shooting if he tries to escape. He is still a closely watched captive accustomed to horrible mind-dimming conditions and treatment, but told suddenly to act naturally (NATURALLY!!) among the throng of the untethered. "If the souls of those who have died sometimes hover among us, see us, easily read in us our trivial concerns, and we fail to see them or guess at their incorporeal presence, then that is what a special-convoy trip is like. You are submerged in the mass of FREEDOM.....you hear strange and insignificant conversations:...some mother-in-law who..does not get along with her daughter-in-law...how someone is in someone else's way in the office.....You listen to all this, and....the true measure of things in the Universe is so clear! [T]hese sinners aren't fated to perceive it. The only one there who is alive, truly alive, is incorporeal you, and all these others are simply mistaken in thinking themselves alive..... an unbridgeable chasm divides you! You cannot cry out to them, nor weep over them, nor shake them by the shoulder: after all, you are a disembodied spirit, you are a ghost, and they are material bodies."

What follows is a tragic transformation of a shocking desire--to reach these people, or make known his plight and direction (escape?)--into a dim futility in even considering it, and then to a surreal but understandable homecoming that leaves a hole in my heart. "After spending a few hours among FREE PEOPLE, here is what I feel: My lips are mute; there is no place for me among them; my hands are tied here. I want free speech! I want to go back to my native land! I want to go home to the Archipelago!"

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### **Arhondi says**

Even for someone familiarized with the era and events, this book has been one of the most difficult reading experiences of the past years. Yet, one should push through and read all of it, in all its gore. We must never forget these events that shaped human history and influence it today - we must look at it straight in the eye and make sure we don't repeat this. A requiem for human pain and endurance in the face of complete absurdity and an ode to the spirit, that strives to be free even in the worst of circumstances. A testimony like very few you can read and experience.

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## Heath says

One of the most compelling non-fiction texts I've ever read. I naively picked this up after reading *One Day In The Life of Ivan Denisovitch* thinking it would be a longer version of a similar concept. Instead, it turns out this mighty work is half well-researched investigation into the processing of Soviet political prisoners and half personal account of the author's own experience in the "sewage-waste disposal" that led to the gulag.

I'll concede that Solzhenitsyn's personal accounts are the real treasure here. He masterfully weaves his own story into the larger picture leaving no one to possibly mistake this for a vanity project. This is material is detailed, comprehensive, and utterly captivating - even though it carries many Russian idiosyncrasies.

Finally, I'd like to add that I spent most of February on this book, thinking there is no better time to read about the Siberian prison system than slugging through my own wintry prison everyday. As I was conducting my normal post-reading research, I happened to discover that my edition of the book only contains the first two volumes of the Gulag Archipelago. Apparently, there are several more volumes! I thought I had accomplished something! It was then that I finally understood the plight of the poor zek who thinks the transit system is the height of his suffering. "In camp, it will be...worse."

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