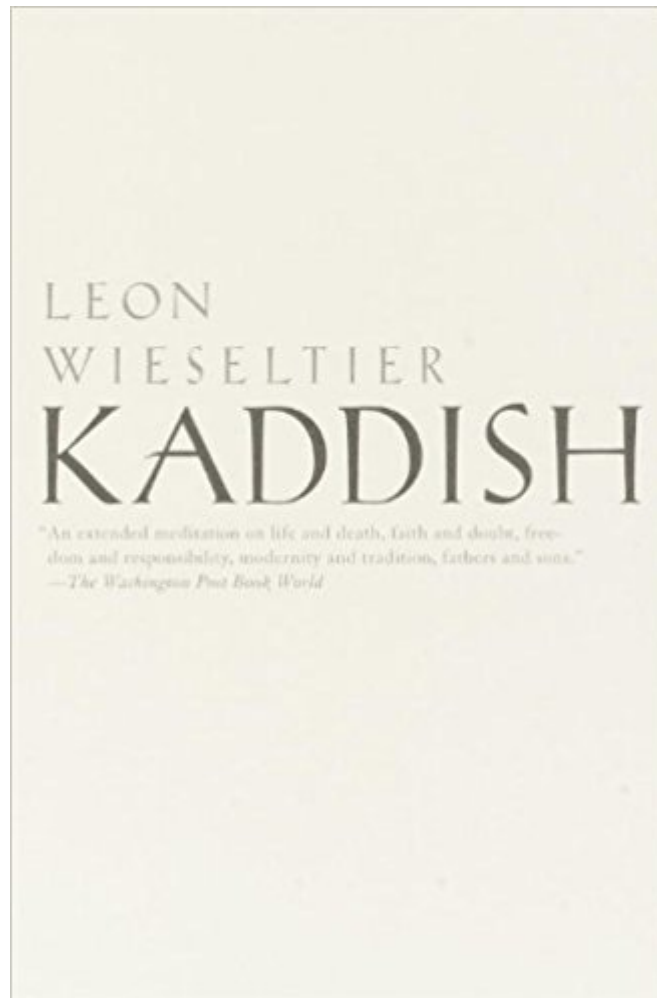


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Kaddish



Synopsis

Winner of the 1998 National Jewish Book Award "An astonishing fusion of learning and psychic intensity; its poignance and lucidity should be an authentic benefit to readers, Jewish and gentile." --The New York Times Book Review Children have obligations to their parents: the Talmud says "one must honor him in life and one must honor him in death." Leon Wieseltier, a diligent but doubting son, recites the Jewish prayer of mourning at his father's grave, and then embarks on the traditional year of saying the kaddish daily. Wieseltier's highly acclaimed Kaddish is the spiritual and thoughtful journal of one of America's most brilliant intellectuals. Driven to explore the origins of the kaddish, from the ancient legend of a wayward ghost to a 17th-century Ukrainian pogrom, he offers as well a mourner's response to the questions of fate, freedom, and faith stirred up in death's wake. Lyric, learned, and deeply moving, Kaddish is suffused with love: a son's embracing of the tradition bequeathed to him by his father, a scholar's savoring of its beauty, and a writer's revealing it, proudly unadorned, to the reader.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This "Gentile reader" (as compared to the 19th century "gentle reader") loved this oh-so-Jewish work. Mr. Wieseltier's book is meditative and beautiful, more like bedside reading (dip in a bit at a time) than a strict narrative. I have read with some bemusement the reviewers here who didn't like it. They seem threatened by an intellectual man who uses his full intellect to consider his faith, or lack of it. Personally, I found this book elegant, engaging, and full of warmth and even occasional humor. My own father is dying, and it helped me ponder his circumstances while thinking about my

eventual response to his impending death. Magnificent work.

It's impossible to categorize this book, because it simply doesn't fit into any conventional category. I'll have to explain exactly what it is: a journal kept by the author in the year after his father's death, in which he researches, ruminates, and comments on Judaism. The book is so intense that I got the impression that he spent the entire year (a) saying kaddish and (b) sitting in a tea room poring over ancient manuscripts. It's a privilege to get a chance to peek into the results of an entire year of study -- not to mention the mind of the author, who at times is brilliant. He is not trying to apologize for anything or to prove anything: he is simply, and honestly, thinking. This is not a book to be read in one sitting; I found myself reading a few pages at a time and then thinking about them. But the book is so well-written that I was in no rush to finish.

I could not wait to read this book. And I could not put it down. I was filled with awe at the scholarship of Jewish people when the rest of Europe was illiterate and uncivilized. I was amazed by the compassionate (and occasionally not so compassionate) views the rabbis had towards mourners and mourning. I learned more than I had thought I could about this odd practice, which Wieseltier made odder still. I agree with all the comments about narcissism, pomposity and the like because the author epitomizes those traits and others like them but in my opinion the book transcends its author's limitations and was utterly fascinating in its breadth and depth. As it maddened me at times and lost me in its obscurity at others I was among those who couldn't put it down. By having slogged through this mighty tome, I felt that my kaddish for my own father was enriched. And in the end, with all the pedantry and scholasticism and weight, the author ends in a spiritual and emotional way. I imagined him having a relationship with his father in death, through the creation of this book, that he could not have during his father's life. And to that, amen.

Leon Wieseltier has created a singular work, exploring 2,000 years of Jewish tradition and thought about death and mourning in the aftermath of his own father's death. The breadth of his knowledge is amazing, and all the more so given that he is something of a non-believer. As a religious Jew, I found his discoveries and his re-examination of his own faith to be moving. The work has two flaws. The first is its length. And while you can excuse its length as being a product of the vast amount of lore and law he sifted through, he occasionally rambles and jumps off the topic. The other flaw is that I just can't imagine too many people wanting to read this. If you're more devout than I, you might find his agnosticism offputting. If you're of a secular bent or not Jewish, why would you want to read

this at all? That such a work got published is a sign that Jewish philosophy is part of the mainstream. But I wonder how many people are like myself and have the patience and curiosity to dive into this book. Maybe it should have been more accessible. Or maybe it's best that some books make the readers work to learn something, the way the author did in writing this. If you are of the right patience and of the right religious bent, however, read this and cherish its beauty.

Kaddish is a controlled and passionately intellectual research in the origins of the mourner's Kaddish. The author uses the death of his father, and therefore the necessity of saying Kaddish, 3 times a day, for a year to inquire into Jewish practice, history, theology and philosophy. This book is neither a memoir nor a textbook for scholars. It is instead a tribute to the Jewish wisdom of the mourning process. Having heard the author speak, I understand why he did not want autobiographic material, why he chose boundaries around his privacy. He wanted intellectual pursuit, not voyeurism. Don't try to read it all at once. Pick it up at random and savor it.

This is one of those books that you put down at times in bafflement and irritation and pick up again twenty minutes later because, dammit, it's under your skin and you can't leave it alone. Not quite like anything else I've come across but that's part of its charm. A lot of erudition, a little navel-gazing, some painfully personal revelations, some zippy one-liners. As a non-Jew, I found some of the author's assumptions about my baseline knowledge of Judaism a little over-optimistic but what else was he to do? This is a personal book, written, I suspect, because it had to be written exactly as it is and not tailored to appeal to some hypothetical market target. And the reward for struggling through some of the more obscure passages where there are few familiar landmarks for the goyim to recognize is the humanity and wry humor of the author's examination of himself, trying to work out why he's embarked on this self-imposed devotional task and how to make sense of a world cluttered with medieval scholars and rabbis, and twentieth century atrocities, but also CD-Roms and contemporary DC, a thousand and one contradictions and very little certainty. So in the end he can't make sense of it all? Who could? Who can? It's still worth reading.

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