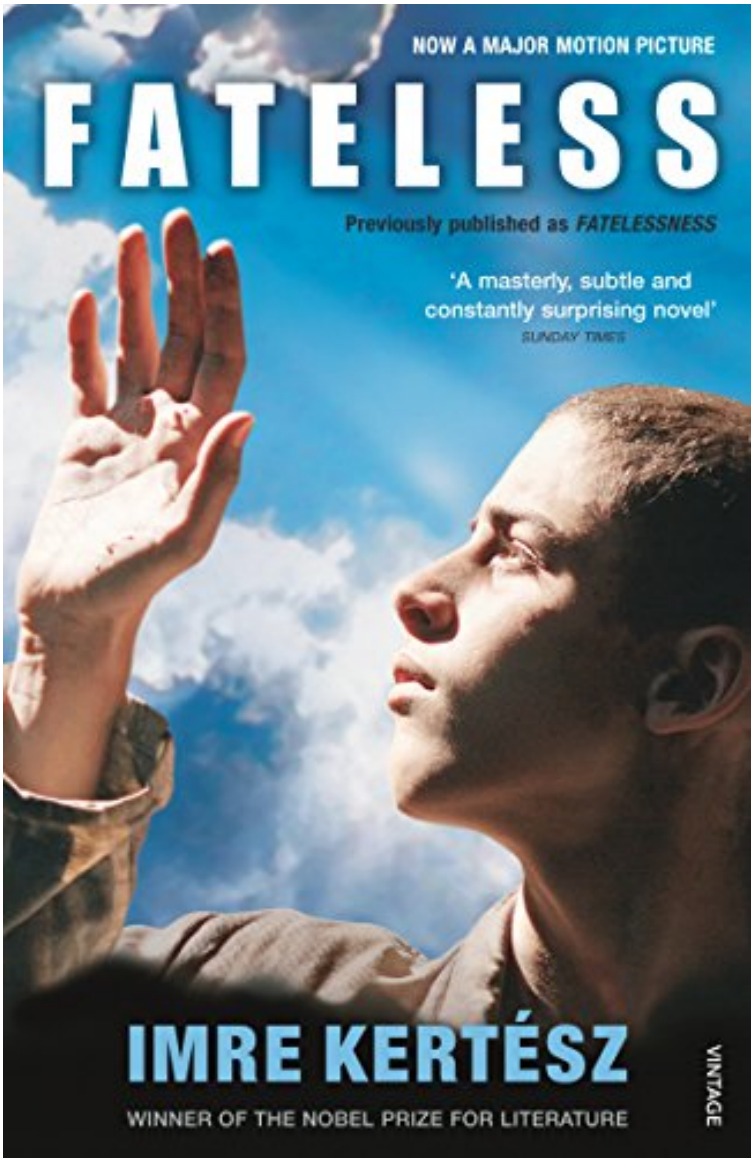
Fateless



Par Imre Kertesz
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Par Imre Kertesz : Fateless before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Fateless:

Description : Description du produitOne of Publishers Weekly's Fifty Best Books of 1992Fateless is a moving and disturbing novel about a Hungarian Jewish boys experiences in German concentration camps and his attempts to reconcile himself to those experiences after the war. Upon his return to his native Budapest still clad in his striped prison clothes, fourteen-year-old George Koves senses the indifference, even hostility, of people on the street. His former neighbors and friends urge him to put the ordeal out of his mind, while a sympathetic journalist refers to the camps as "the lowest circle of hell." The boy can relate to neither cliche and is left to ponder the meaning of his experience alone.George's response to his experience is curiously ambivalent. In the camps he tries to adjust to his ever-worsening situation by imputing human motives to his inhumane captors. By imposing his logic--that of a bright, sensitive, though in many ways ordinary teenager - he maintains a precarious semblance of normalcy. Once freed, he must contend with the

"banality of evil" to which he has become accustomed: when asked why he uses words like "naturally," "undeniably," and "without question" to describe the most horrendous of experiences, he responds, "In the concentration camp it was natural." Without emotional or spiritual ties to his Jewish heritage and rejected by his country, he ultimately comes to the conclusion that neither his Hungarianness nor his Jewishness was really at the heart of his fate: rather, there are only "given situations, and within these, further givens."

Prsentation de l'diteur'While the average reader cannot pretend truly to understand the reality of those who suffered in concentration camps, Kertesz draws us one step closer' ObserverGyuri, a fourteen-year-old Hungarian Jew, gets the day off school to witness his father signing over the family timber business - his final act before being sent to a labour camp. Two months later, Gyuri finds himself assigned to a 'permanent workplace'. This is the start of his journey to Auschwitz.On his arrival Gyuri finds that he is unable to identify with other Jews, and is rejected by them. An outsider among his own people, his estrangement makes him a preternaturally acute observer, dogmatically insisting on making sense of the barbarity - and beauty - he witnesses.ExtraitOneI didn't go to school today. Or rather, I did go, but only to ask my class teacher's permission to take the day off. I also handed him the letter in which, referring to "family reasons," my father requested that I be excused. He asked what the "family reason" might be. I told him my father had been called up for labor service; after that he didn't raise a further peep against it.I didn't head home but to our shop. Father had said they would wait for me there. He added that I should hurry as well because he might need me. In actual fact, that was partly why he had asked me to be let off school. Or else so that "he might have me there on his last day before being separated from home," since he said that too, though admittedly some other time. He said it to my mother, as I recall, when he phoned her this morning. Today is a Thursday, as it happens, and on Thursdays and Sundays my afternoons, strictly speaking, belong to my mother. Still, Father informed her: "I can't let you have young Gyuri today," and then went on to give that as the reason. Though maybe it wasn't like that after all. I was rather sleepy this morning on account of last night's air-raid warning, so perhaps I don't remember it clearly. I am quite sure, though, that he said it-if not to Mother, then to someone else.I too spoke a few words to Mother, though I no longer remember what. I think she may have been annoyed with me because I was obliged to be a little short with her, what with Father being there: after all, today it is his wishes I have to consider. When I was about to set off from the house, even my stepmother had a few private words with me in the hall, just between the two of us. She said she hoped that, on what was such a sad day for us, "she could count on my behaving appropriately." I had no clue what I could say to that, so I said nothing. She may have misinterpreted my silence, however, because she went straight on to say something along the lines that she had no wish to offend my sensibilities with those words of advice, which, she was well aware, were quite unnecessary. She had no doubt that with me being a big boy, now in my fifteenth year, I was quite capable of grasping for myself the gravity of the blow that had been inflicted on us, as she put it. I nodded. I could see she was content to leave it at that. She even moved a hand in my direction, and I half feared that she might perhaps be wanting to hug me. She didn't do so in the end, just let out a deep sigh, with a long, tremulous release of breath. I noticed her eyes moistening as well. It was awkward. After that, I was allowed to go.I covered the stretch between school and our shop on foot. It was a clear, balmy morning, considering it was still just early spring. I was about to unbutton myself but then had second thoughts: it was possible that, light as the head breeze was, my coat lapel might flap back and cover up my yellow star, which would not have been in conformity with the regulations. There were by now a few things I had to be more on my guard against. Our cellar timber store is nearby, on a side street. A steep stairway leads down into the gloom. I found my father and stepmother in the office, a glass cage lit up like an aquarium, right at the foot of the steps. Also with them was Mr. Sto, whom I have known from the time he entered our employment as a bookkeeper and as manager of the other, outdoor lumberyard that he has in fact already purchased from us since then. At least that's what they say, because Mr. Sto, given that he is completely aboveboard regarding his race, does not wear a yellow star, so the whole thing is actually just a kind of business dodge, as I understand it, enabling him to look after our property there, and then again so we don't have to do entirely without an income in the meanwhile.That had a bit to do with why I greeted him differently from the way I used to do, for after all he has, in a sense, risen to a higher status than us; my father and stepmother too were clearly more deferential toward him. Though he, for his part, sticks all the more stubbornly to addressing my father as "boss" and my stepmother as "my dear lady," as if nothing had happened, never failing to plant a kiss on her hand while he is at it. He welcomed me as well in his old, jocular tone, oblivious to my yellow star. After that, I stood where I was, by the door, while they

picked up where they had left off on my arrival. As I saw it, I must have interrupted them right in the middle of some discussion. I did not understand at first what they were talking about. I even closed my eyes for a second because they were still a bit dazzled from the sunlight up on the street. Meanwhile my father said something, and by the time I opened them, there was Mr. Sto. Yellowish red light-spots were dancing like bursting pustules all over his round, brownish-skinned features, with the pencil moustache and the tiny gap between his two broad, white front teeth. The next sentence was again spoken by my father, with something about "goods" that "it would be best" if Mr. Sto "were to take with him right away." Mr. Sto had no objection, whereupon my father took out from a desk drawer a small package wrapped in tissue paper and tied up with string. Only then did I see what goods they were actually talking about, since I immediately recognized the package from its flat shape: it contained a box. In the box were our more precious jewels and such; indeed, I rather fancy that it was precisely on my account that they had called them "goods," lest I recognize them. Mr. Sto at once thrust it into his briefcase. After that, however, a minor dispute sprang up between them, because Mr. Sto took out his fountain pen, with the aim of giving my father a "receipt for the goods" no matter what. He dug in his heels for a fair while, even though my father told him "don't be childish," and "there's no need for that sort of thing between the two of us." I noticed that pleased Mr. Sto to no end. He said so too: "I'm well aware that you trust me, boss, but in real life there is a right and proper way of doing things." He even appealed to my stepmother for her assistance: "Isn't that so, my dear lady?" With a wan smile, though, she merely said something to the effect that she left it entirely up to the men how the matter was best arranged.The whole thing was beginning to bore me slightly by the time he eventually tucked the fountain pen away after all, at which they started to chew over the matter of the stockroom here, and what they should do with all the planks of wood in it. I heard my father urging the need for haste, before the authorities "might get round to laying their hands on the business," asking Mr. Sto to give my stepmother the benefit of his business experience and expertise over this. Turning toward my stepmother, Mr. Sto at once declared, "It goes without saying, dear madam. We shall be in constant contact in any case over the settling of the accounts." I think he was speaking about the premises that were now in his hands. After an age, he at last began to take leave. He took a long time over his glum-faced shaking of my father's hand. He nevertheless ventured that "long speeches have no place at a moment like this," and so he wished to say just one word of farewell to my father, namely, "See you again soon, boss." My father replied with a quick, wry smile, "Let's hope so, Mr. Sto." At the same time, my stepmother opened her handbag, pulled out a handkerchief, and straightaway dabbed at her eyes. Strange noises welled up in her throat. There was a hush; the situation was really embarrassing, since I had a feeling that I too ought to do something. But with the whole scene taking me by surprise, nothing sensible occurred to me. I could see that the thing was also making Mr. Sto uneasy: "My dear lady," he said, "you mustn't. Really not." He looked a tiny bit alarmed. He bowed and virtually fixed his lips to my stepmother's hand to perform his usual hand-kiss. He then at once scurried for the door, barely giving me time to jump out of his way. He even forgot to say good-bye to me. We could still hear his heavy tread on the stairs for a while once he had gone.After something of a pause, my father said, "Well then, at least that's out of the way." At that, my stepmother, her voice still a bit husky, asked whether it wouldn't have been better if my father had accepted that receipt from Mr. Sto all the same. My father, though, replied that a receipt like that had no "practical value" at all, besides which it would be even more hazardous to conceal it than the box itself. He explained to her that now "we have to stake everything on a single card," which was to have complete confidence in Mr. Sto, particularly since right now we had no alternative any-way. My stepmother fell quiet at that, and then she remarked that my father might be right, but all the same she would feel safer "with a receipt in her hand." On the other hand, she was unable to give a satisfactory explanation as to why. At that point, my father urged that they make a start on the job at hand since, as he put it, time was pressing. He wanted to turn the business accounts over to her so that she would be able to find her way around them even in his absence, and so the business need not come to a standstill because he was in a labor camp. In the meantime he exchanged a few fleeting words with me as well. He asked if being let off school had gone smoothly, and so forth. In the end, he told me to sit down and keep quiet until he and my stepmother had done what they had to do with the books.That, however, took an age. I tried to be patient for a bit, striving to think of Father, and more specifically the fact that he would be going tomorrow and, quite probably, I would not see him for a long time after that; but after a while I grew weary with that notion and then, seeing as how there was nothing else I could do for my father, I began to get bored. Even having to sit around became a drag, so simply for the sake of a change I stood up to take a drink of water from the tap. They said nothing. Later on, I also made my way to the back, between the

planks, in order to pee. On returning, I washed my hands at the rusty, tiled sink, then unpacked my morning snack from my school satchel, ate that, and finally took another drink from the tap. They still said nothing. I sat back in my place. After that, I got terribly bored for another absolute age.It was already noon by the time we got out onto the street. My eyes were again dazzled, this time offended by the light. My father fiddled around a long time with the two gray padlocks-to the point that I had a feeling he was doing it deliberately. He then handed over the keys to my stepmother, given that he would no longer have any use for them. I know that, because he said as much. My stepmother opened her handbag; I feared it was for the handkerchief again, but all she did was tuck the keys away. We then set off in a great hurry. I thought at first we were going home, but no, before that there was still shopping to be done. My stepmother had a rather lengthy list of all the things Father would need in the labor camp. She had already procured some of them yesterday, but now we had to track down the rest. It was a slightly uncomfortable feeling going around with them like that, as a trio, yellow stars on all three of us. The matter is more a source of amusement to me when I am on my own, but together with them it was close to embarrassing. I couldn't explain why that was, but later on I no longer took any notice of it. All the shops were crowded except the one where we bought the knapsack: there we were the only customers. The air was permeated with the pungent smell of proofed canvas. The shopkeeper, a little old man with sallow skin but gleaming false teeth and an oversleeve on one arm, and his plump wife were extremely cordial. They piled up all sorts of items before us on the counter. I noticed that the shopkeeper called the old lady "Lovey," and it was always her he sent off to fetch items. As it happens, I know the shop, because it is situated close to where we live, but I had never been inside before. It is actually a sort of sports goods shop, though they sell other merchandise as well. Of late it has even been possible to get their own make of yellow stars there, given that now there was a big shortage of yellow fabric, of course. (As for our own needs, my stepmother had taken care of that in good time.) As best I could make out, it was their innovative twist to have the material stretched over some cardboard base, so that way, of course, it looked more attractive, plus the arms of the stars weren't cut in such a ludicrously clumsy fashion as some of the homemade ones that were to be seen. I noticed that they themselves had their own wares adorning their chests, but in such a way as to seem that they were only wearing them in order to make them appeal to customers.From Publishers WeeklyKertesz (Kaddish for an Unborn Child), who, as a youth, spent a year as a prisoner in Auschwitz, has crafted a superb, haunting novel that follows Gyorgy Koves, a 14-year old Hungarian Jew, during the year he is imprisoned in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Fighting to retain his equilibrium when his world turns upside down, Gyorgy rationalizes that certain events are "probably natural" or "probably a mistake." Gradual starvation and what he experiences as grinding boredom become a way of life for him, yet Gyorgy describes both Buchenwald and its guards as "beautiful"; as he asks "who can judge what is possible or believable in a concentration camp?" Gyorgy also comes to a sense of himself as a Jew. At first, he experiences a strong distaste for the Jewish-looking prisoners; he doesn't know Hebrew (for talking to God) or Yiddish (for talking to other Jews). Fellow inmates even claim Gyorgy is "no Jew," and make him feel he isn't "entirely okay." Kertesz's spare, understated prose and the almost ironic perspective of Gyorgy, limited both by his youth and his inability to perceive the enormity of what he is caught up in, give the novel an intensity that will make it difficult to forget. One learns something of concentration camp life here, even while becoming convinced that one cannot understand that life at all--not the way Kertesz does.