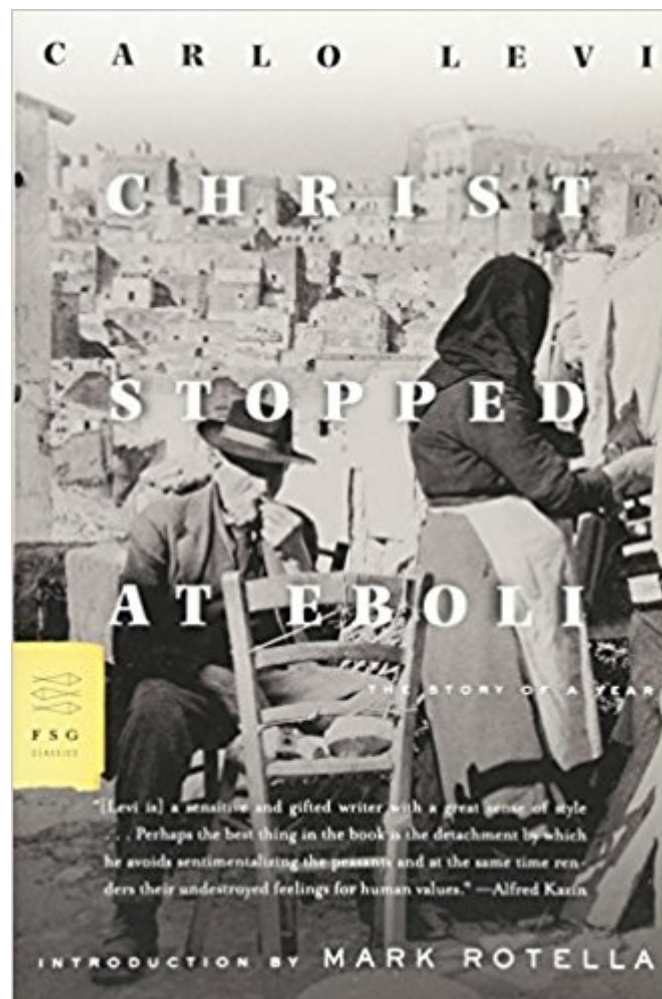




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Christ Stopped At Eboli: The Story Of A Year (FSG Classics)



Synopsis

It was to Lucania, a desolate land in southern Italy, that Carlo Levi— a doctor, painter, philosopher, and man of letters— was confined as a political prisoner because of his opposition to Italy's Fascist government at the start of the Ethiopian war in 1935. While there, Levi reflected on the harsh landscape and its inhabitants, peasants who lived the same lives their ancestors had, constantly fearing black magic and the near presence of death. In so doing, Levi offered a starkly beautiful and moving account of a place and a people living outside the boundaries of progress and time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“[Levi is] a sensitive and gifted writer with a great sense of style.”
— Alfred Kazin

Text: English, Italian (translation) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Haunting and beautifully written Carlo Levi gives us a glimpse of a part of Italy that was forgotten and neglected and tells of the daily life of an impoverished, superstitious people who had resigned to their lot. Banished to a small town in Lucania (now the region known as Basilicata) because of his

anti-fascist activity, Levi, a doctor, writer and artist, spent one year in captivity internalizing his experiences. A few years later during WWII, while hiding out in a room in Florence because he was a Jew, he wrote the book, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. The book is poetry, prose, and a scathing condemnation of the Italian government who shamefully neglected southern Italy after the Risorgimento and subsequent unification of Italy. Christ did not literally stop at Eboli. The title infers that the peasants of Lucania felt they were less than human...that the term "Christian" was synonymous with the word human and humanity stopped north of them. Centuries of oppression led them to consider themselves not much more than mules. Levi's lucid description helped begin the conversation of the "Problem of the South" after the war ended. As a descendant of grandparents who emigrated from this Italian region, the book touched me on a personal level.

This book was a major surprise. I was looking for something to read about Basilicata, the region in southern Italy between Puglia and Campania. I had heard of the title but no idea what it was about. The author, Carlo Levi, was a northern Italian anti-fascist, when in 1935 he was exiled by Mussolini to a small village in the south. He writes feelingly and poetically about the people and place, the daily struggle of the peasants, and what life was like in a region so remote and out of the way, it was considered a good alternative to prison for Mussolini's political enemies. When the book was published in the late 1940's, many Italians felt shamed by the description of inhuman conditions, eventually leading to a nation-wide movement to improve the lives of people who had been disregarded for so long. It may not sound that compelling, but the book's great surprise is that you are totally drawn into Levi's growing empathy and solidarity with his downtrodden neighbors.

Christ Stopped at Eboli is a memoir of an Italian dissident exiled to far south Italy in the 1930's. Despite the title, it's not a religious tract. It's just a reference to the remoteness of the area—so remote in Italy that not even Christ bothered to go that far out of His way; he went no further than Eboli. As a memoir, it's brilliant at capturing the humdrum, day to day lives of the desperately poor peasants, as well as the absurdities of parasitical politicians and the machinations of local gentry. (In that sense, it reminds me of *The Soil* by Takashi Nagatsuka, a depiction of daily life in early 20th century Japan.) Underlying Carlo Levi's tale of exile is a critique of the central government in Rome and the lethargy it fostered in the citizens. Toward the end, he says, "There will always be an abyss between the State and the peasants, whether the State be Fascist, Liberal, Socialist—we can bridge the abyss only when we succeed

in creating a government in which the peasants feel they have some share. Just as long as Rome controls our local affairs and wields the power of life and death over us we shall go on like dumb animals. He advocates a government "neither Fascist, nor Communist, nor even Liberal, for all three of these are forms of the religion of the State. Instead, the individual must be made the basis of the State, not the other way around. If not, the ill advised intentions of the State will prevent the peasants from feeling they participate and poverty and deserts result. This is a great story and worth your time for the fun of reading and the message that underlies it.

Levi, a doctor and painter and intellectual, spent a year in the mid-1930's in Gagliano, Lucania, a peasant town in southern Italy, exiled there by the Fascist government for unspecified political offenses. *CHRIST STOPPED AT EBOLI* is his sensitive and loving portrait of life in Gagliano. In many ways the peasants were still pagans ("everything participates in divinity"); Christianity as a religion had not yet penetrated that far south in Italy; in other words, "Christ stopped at Eboli" (a city somewhat north of Gagliano). Levi recounts in detail the lives and world-view of these Twentieth-Century European peasants, which is summarized in the following passage: "This suffering together, this fatalistic, comradely, age-old patience, is the deepest feeling the peasants have in common, a bond made by nature rather than by religion." Interesting as it is, the book moves slowly -- probably much like the pace of life in Gagliano, but too slowly for me. Levi is not a particularly rigorous or logical thinker; his mentality is more that of a poet. Yet the writing, while not quite pedestrian, is at times ponderous and never really outstanding (perhaps that is in part the fault of the translation). Hence, after reading the book, I was mildly surprised by the mostly glowing reviews on , and I initially refrained from posting my own review, thinking that perhaps I was being overly critical. But I just finished reading *VOICES OF THE OLD SEA* by Norman Lewis, which is a portrait of peasant life in two remote villages in Spain in the late 1940s. Despite the different countries and a 15-year gap in time, there are many similarities between the communal lives portrayed by Lewis and by Levi. Yet Lewis's is a much superior book, in large part because the pace is quicker and the prose far better. By no means do I wish to discourage anyone from reading *CHRIST STOPPED AT EBOLI*, but if you enjoyed it, or think you might enjoy it, I do encourage you to read *VOICES OF THE OLD SEA* as well.

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