



## The Pillar of Salt

*Albert Memmi , Edouard Roditi (Translator)*

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Originally published in 1953 (in English in 1955), The Pillar of Salt the semi-autobiographical novel about a young boy growing up in French colonized Tunisia. To gain access to privileged French society, he must reject his many identities – Jew, Arab, and African. But, on the eve of World War II, he is forced to come to terms with his loyalties and his past.

## **The Pillar of Salt Details**

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Author : Albert Memmi , Edouard Roditi (Translator)

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## From Reader Review The Pillar of Salt for online ebook

### Myriam says

This is the story of a Tunisian Jew of French culture, of finding his identity (which it seems he doesn't actually figure out), about the second world war. I enjoyed reading it, but not much. I didn't find in it anything I haven't read elsewhere.

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### Rezgui Mahdi says

Ce roman, préfacé par Camus, est considéré comme un classique de la littérature maghrébine. Son écriture, sobre, limpide, est démonstrative et presque didactique. Ses thèmes sont l'interrogation sur l'identité et les rapports du moi avec sa communauté et les autres groupes qui cohabitent à Tunis avant et pendant la seconde guerre mondiale. Sa structure est celle du roman autobiographique : le héros, Alexandre Mordekhaï Benillouche, Juif tunisien pauvre, découvre tour à tour l'école, la sexualité, la peur, la solidarité. Apparenté à un roman à thèse, ce livre s'ouvre sur l'impasse Tarfoune, la hara, le quartier juif et finit par l'exil volontaire et presque fortuit. Entre les deux, le héros n'arrive à s'ancrer ni dans sa famille et sa communauté, trop dévalorisées par référence au fascinant rationalisme occidental appris à l'école française, ni dans ce rationalisme même, mis à rude épreuve par les intérêts sordides et les compromissions historiques de l'Occident qui n'est idéal que dans les livres, ni enfin à la jeune nation en devenir qu'est cette Tunisie dont il se sent l'enfant et à laquelle il sait intuitivement qu'il ne pourra pas s'intégrer. [par Afifa Marzouki]

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### Eric Jay Sonnenschein says

Pillar of Salt, by Albert Memmi, meant a lot to me because it was a literary hybrid I love--the autobiographical novel. This book proved that a personal narrative can be fascinating even if the protagonist and his environment are poor and not particularly sordid or violent. Memmi's father was a humble tradesman and his mother was a housewife in the Jewish sector of the Tunis medina. His family was poor and his parents were not educated. Yet, he described them in such a way that they were fascinating. Memmi dazzles the reader with his clarity and compassionate insight about the world in which he grew up.

When you realize at the end of this novel that Albert would go on to become a renown philosopher after studying at the best university in France, it gives you a special appreciation for the journey he has taken. This is no Horatio Alger story, but it demonstrates that the human mind is miraculous. Its ability to comprehend completely alien subjects with logic and imagination is our greatest power.

I found this book even more cogent because it takes place in Tunis, a city I came to know well when I was in the Peace Corps in Tunisia. Like Memmi, I was a Jew in Tunisia, although when I was there, being an American Jew was a bit more controversial due to the Arab antipathy for Israel and her allies.

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### Danielle says

A bit too long. It always the same story of children born and raised in a culture and educated in another, especially for those who grow up in colonized country... And then, if the writer/hero is jewish, life tends to get even more complicated. And if a war comes along, even more complicated...

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### **Delphine says**

Présenté comme un récit fictionnalisé, il s'agit des mémoires d'un jeune juif tunisien du ghetto. Un très beau récit. A lire absolument.

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### **Alan says**

Striking account of the forgotten Jewish refugees from Arab lands.

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### **Scott says**

Another memoir that is poetic, but essentially reads like a slideshow of a vacation. There is no narrative tension. The cultural ideas are a poor stand in for plot.

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### **Kelly says**

I had this book assigned to me for a French Cinema and Culture class with a concentration on French Jews in North Africa. Due to it being it an assigned reading, I wasn't necessarily in the mood to read this genre of narrative, however, I do feel it is a good book. It shows a very cerebral exploration of the mind before, during, and after the Vichy occupation of Tunisia through the eyes of a Jewish North African male. It concentrates on certain physical events, but mostly how that affects his emotional and mental consciousness. I enjoyed it because it was a very good discussion book in my class, but again, I could tell I would have liked it better had I been in the proper mood to read it.

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### **Brigettelorraine says**

"It is as if language, far from being a transparent tool, really shares some of the nature of the things it designates as well as some of their weight."

"One's home town can no more be replaced than one's mother."

"In trying to sit in many chairs one winds up on the floor."

"Our memories of things impose some order on the past and give it its meaning."

"It left him free to lead an utterly airy life, without roots of any kind."

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"travel if you wish, taste strange dishes, gather experience in dangerous adventures, but see that your soul remains your own. Do not become a stranger to yourself for you are lost from that day on; you will have no peace if there is not, somewhere within you a corner of certainty, calm waters where you can take refuge."

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### **Laurel says**

The Pillar of Salt is a must-read for anyone visiting Tunisia. "A man may travel, marvel at the world, change, become a stranger to his relatives and friends, but he will always retain within him the hard kernel of his awareness of belonging to some nameless village."

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### **YoussefBS says**

Ce livre a changé ma vie.

Albert Memmi y décrit le Tunis des années d'avant l'indépendance. L'auteur raconte sa recherche de soi, son oscillation entre orient et occident, son choix, ses désillusions et finalement son départ. Toutes les communautés anciennement présentes en Tunisie y sont décrites: Les français, les italiens, les juifs, et les musulmans. A travers une histoire pleine de rebondissements, l'auteur décrit ce qu'était la vie de tous les jours à Tunis, sans folklorisation ni nostalgie. L'auteur exorcise son passé à travers un récit semi-biographique, et ne mâche pas ses mots pour fustiger tous ce qu'il haïssait.

Ce roman m'a permis de découvrir un Tunis différent du celui contemporain. L'ambiance de Hara disparue de nos jours, se rapproche de certains quartiers devenus ghettos et voués à une destruction imminente. L'histoire est un éternel recommencement.

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### **Carlos Hugo Winckler Godinho says**

Gostei de ter uma perspectiva diferente da segunda guerra mundial, já que o cenário é a Tunísia. Também, mal comparando, é bem mais interessante que O Castelo Branco para mostrar o contraponto Oriente-Ocidente.

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### **Beesley says**

Beautifully written, remarkable coming of age story. Contains some fantastic descriptions of what it's like to grow up truly poor offered by a character who actually experienced the poverty. Has terrific passages about separating from one's parents and finding one's own identity in spite of parental expectations. Addresses the conundrum of not fitting in anywhere, how it happens, what it feels like, and how it shapes life choices. Grapples with existential questions. If I taught a literature class, this book would be on the reading list.

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## **Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says**

This is a well-written novel about the life of a Jewish Tunisian boy, growing up in the years leading up to WW2. It is generally considered to be autobiographical, and though the narrator's name is not the author's, it reads more like a memoir than a novel: it records Alexandre's memories and thoughts about his life, but has few if any traditional scenes and very little dialogue or physical description; the detail is primarily emotional. And yet, the specific incidents that make up the narrator's experiences feel drawn from life, rather than the types of occurrences an author is likely to invent.

The first section of the novel is about Alexandre's childhood, and it begins in almost idyllic fashion, though it gains complexity as he becomes aware of his family's poverty and the divisions in his society. The second and longest section follows him through high school, torn between the traditional lifestyle of his family (who come to resent allowing him to study at all, since it means not bringing in money) and the European middle class. This part of the book reminded me of Ferrante's Neapolitan novels in its examination of social class, through the lens of an impoverished student trying to succeed in an almost foreign world. The final section is about WW2 and the German occupation, and while this is by no means a thriller, it introduces some suspense and is a different sort of war story than I'd read before.

At any rate, I enjoyed this book: it is well-written (or well-translated), and the narrator is complex and feels genuine. While there's no single plot, the story kept my interest, and formed a great introduction to the complexities of a place I knew next to nothing about. The supporting characters receive less development, and there are more of them than we could get to know well – again, in memoir-like fashion – but in a story focused on the narrator's search for identity, it works. I would recommend this one.

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## **Hatem says**

Very touching account of the life of Tunisian Jews in the ghetto, among Muslims, Sicilians etc. I learned a lot about the 30-40s in my home city, including the German occupation and the labor camps

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## **Luke says**

This is a remarkable novel (although I don't know that I would call it a novel, it reads more like a memoir and many scholars argue that it is semi-autobiographical).

In short, Memmi's character, Alexandre Benillouche, is a Tunisian Jew raised in poverty. Due to his academic excellence, he gained a scholarship to high school--something that few Jews and Arabs (or, in Memmi's words, "Muslims") had access to. As such, he was socialized into Western culture and, in many ways, middle class society. However, no matter how hard he tries, he is unable to shed his impoverished background. In trying to fit into Western society, Benillouche sheds his African and Jewish background, criticizing Jewish culture, religion, and society, as well as North African society. However, with the coming of World War II, France surrenders to Germany, the Vichy government is formed, and eventually Germans and Italians occupy Tunisia (this history is rather well known).

As a Jew, Benillouche is placed in a forced labor camp (after seeking aid from his French superiors and colleagues) and manages to escape with many others as the British and Americans fight the Germans and

Italians outside of Tunis. Due to the brutality of the German and Vichy governments, Benillouche becomes disillusioned with the West, although he regains hope after the war ends in Tunisia (though it continues elsewhere). After attempting to enlist with the Free French, a military officer asks him to lie about his name because Vichy had been putting out propaganda that the entire Gaullist military was made up of the Jews. This turns Benillouche away from the West entirely.

Having shed his North African and Jewish background, and being rejected by the West, Benillouche finds that he fits nowhere in colonial society. His status at birth defined the trajectory of his life, no matter how hard he attempted to transcend it. In the end, he opts to migrate to Argentina with a friend.

The charm in this book is not necessarily the vignettes offered, although these are crucial to the narrative. Memmi rarely includes particularly tense moments, and instead aims to write about the mundane, but perhaps unique, aspects of Benillouche's life. As a result, we readers do not see Benillouche as a simple hero fighting against the system, but as one normal man who may have done well, but is more an everyman than anything else. This is significant, because Memmi is trying to teach us about the broad psychological tolls of colonialism on native populations. This is something that he does astoundingly well, as the reader (in this case, me) develops the sense that Benillouche's sentiments are widespread, not restricted to him alone.

The title of the book, *The Pillar of Salt* (or, in french, *La Statue de sel*), is a fascinating choice and it works well. Like Lot, Benillouche presses forward, but by the end of the story, he must ask if looking back at his life will metaphorically turn him to salt as well.

Highly recommend for anyone who wants to better understand colonialism as a lived experience. This book is not particularly exciting outside of that, so those looking for adventure should look elsewhere.

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### **Alithia Hanne says**

Le jeune homme dont l'histoire est contée ici ne parvient à se définir qu'en additionnant aux refus que les autres font de lui les refus que lui-même oppose au monde. Il est juif (de mère berbère, ce qui ne simplifie rien) et sujet tunisien, c'est-à-dire sujet du bey de Tunis. Cependant, il n'est pas réellement tunisien, le premier pogrome où les Arabes massacrent les juifs le lui démontre. Sa culture est française et, de toute sa classe, il est le seul à entendre Racine comme il faut. Cependant, la France de Vichy le livre aux Allemands et la France Libre, le jour où il veut se battre pour elle, lui demande de changer la consonance judaïque de son nom. Il ne lui resterait plus que d'être vraiment juif si, pour l'être, il ne fallait partager une foi qu'il n'a pas et des traditions qui lui paraissent ridicules.

Que sera-t-il donc pour finir ? On serait tenté de dire un écrivain. (Sartre).

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### **Elizabeth (Alaska) says**

Every day that I picked this up, I thought how fortunate I am to be part of the Goodreads community. Otherwise, I likely would never have known about this book, nor availed myself of the opportunity of reading it. It isn't long enough for it to have taken nearly a week to finish. I found myself time-challenged several days and, though that should not be an excuse, time somehow has a way of escaping despite my best intentions.

The description of this tells us it is a coming of age story. The last sentence is accurate: *This is an unusual man's coming of age story and a document about a community that has now all but disappeared.* I'd like to emphasize the word unusual, because this is anything but what one might expect of a coming of age story. It is so much more than that, though, because the second part of that sentence is what makes this of enduring interest. What would I know about Tunis if it were not for this book? (And yes, I know little of the Tunis today, but can feel confident it is much different.) It begins between the wars.

I was ten years old, as I've said, and an only son. I indeed had my sister Kalla, but in our families the son, especially an only son, is truly a privileged being. For a long while, I actually expected to hear God speak to me personally, and my heart often beat faster if I thought that I could distinguish a voice speaking in the rustling of tree leaves. Always encouraged and confirmed in my awareness of superiority, I was convinced that an extraordinary destiny awaited me.

Later, our first person narrator has begun to see things a bit differently. In this sentence, we perhaps learn how difficult a melting pot that doesn't melt can be for some. How difficult it can be to be no one who matters!

I'm African, not European. In the long run, I would always be forced to return to Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, a native in a colonial country, a Jew in an anti-Semitic universe, an African in a world dominated by Europe.

I cannot write enough good things about my reading experience of this. While I cannot relate in any way to the first person narrator - and never shed a tear - Memmi well conveys the pain of this childhood, this coming of age. Memmi has written others. I don't know if I will have the opportunity to read any of them, but I most certainly would not avoid him - ever. This belongs on my 5-star shelf!

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### **Sara A says**

The most uncomfortable coming of age story I've ever read, written in the early 1950s by Albert Memi, a Tunisian Arab Jew, about a working class kid called Alexandre Mordakhai Benillouche growing up in the no-man's land between the Jewish ghetto and the Jewish middle-class in Tunis. Pretty incredible, honest, disturbing, and has one of the most memorable (and hard to like/ impossible to hate) narrators I've ever come across. As a study of the sheer psychological weight of social mobility in a minority community, its better than ten soc classes. It's also a pretty grim portrayal of a city divided by religion, class, history and colonialism in the years leading up to WWII, when the Nazis occupied it. Definitely worth a read, though it feels a bit like having to take your medicine.

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### **Tumelo Moleleki says**

Very honest critique and an account of Mordekhai's turbulent life and murky waters that are his beliefs and his 'civilisation'. He laid himself bare for scrutiny and judgement. It read like a biography.

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