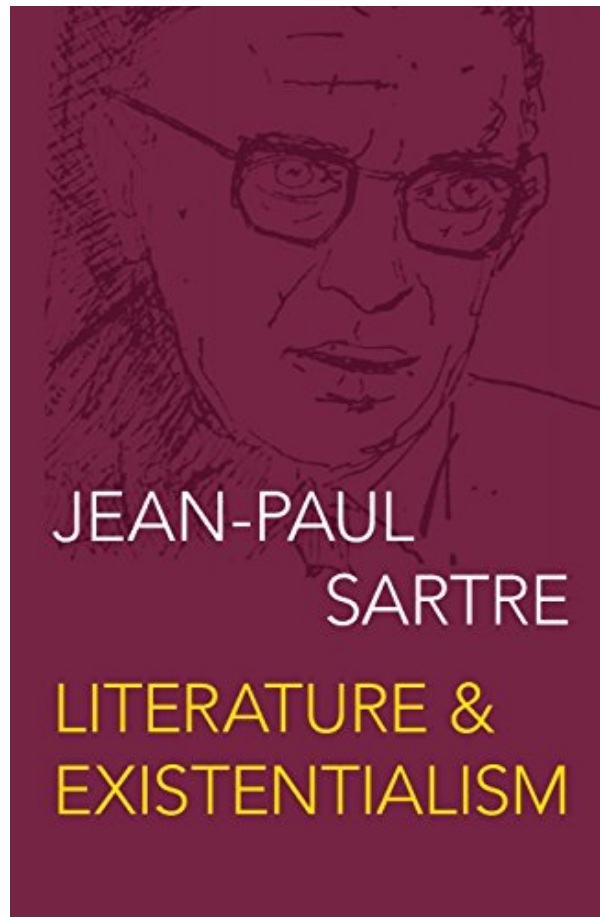
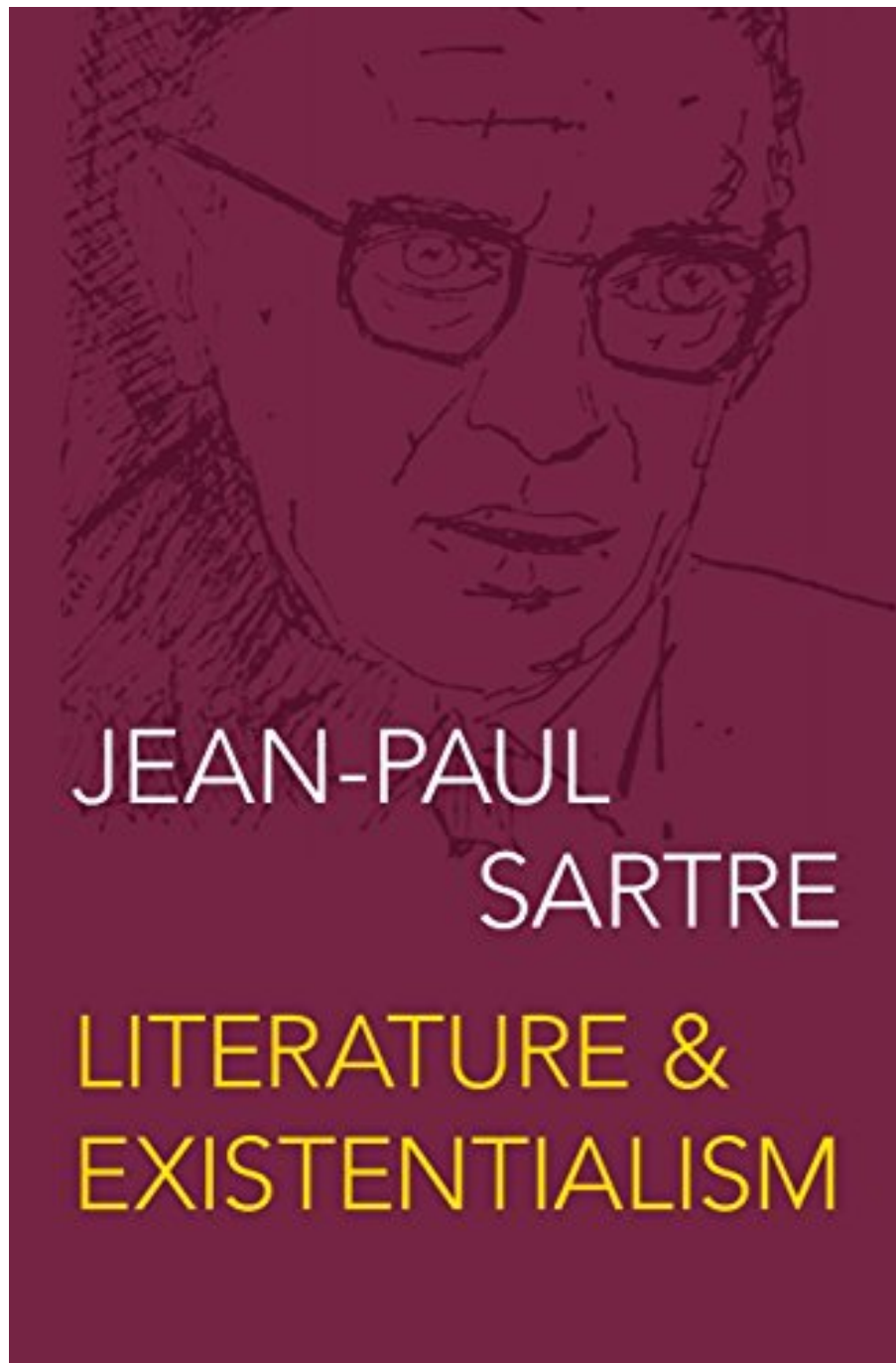


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About the Author

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) was a significant voice in the creation of existential thought. His explorations of the ways human existence is unique among all life-forms in its capacity to choose continue to influence fields such as Marxist philosophy, sociology, and literary studies. He was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature, but refused the honor.

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In a probing philosophical exploration of the act of literary creation, Sartre asks: “What is writing?,” “Why write?,” and “For whom does one write?”

After discussing existentialism as it pertains to art, human emotions, and psychology, French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre turns the question of existentialism to the subject of literature by stating that he wishes to “examine the art of writing without prejudice.” Sartre eschews the idea of artists and writers comparing their works of art to one another; instead, he argues, “they exist by themselves.” Tying into his thoughts on literature, Sartre additionally delves into Marxist politics, the intellectual labor of the writer, the individual reader, and the reading public.

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By Glenn Russell

Twentieth century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre maintained one value supreme above all others – freedom. This being the case, is it any surprise Sartre places freedom front and center when addressing literature’s connection with existentialism? Below are quotes from the second of this three part book, a part entitled ‘Why Write?’ along with my comments:

“With each of our acts the world reveals a new face.” ----- By this statement Sartre emphasizes a prime reason for artistic creation: the need artists and writers have to feel they are essential in relationship to the world, that is, through their writing or painting the world is revealed in unique and important ways. Literature places a distinctively human stamp on the world and with each new painting or book another valuable, vital stamp is added. I think we can all agree the world would be smaller and poorer without, to

name just several, Virginia Woolf and Leo Tolstoy, R. K. Narayan and Raymond Chandler, Anne Tyler, Philip K. Dick and Shusaku Endo.

“It is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others. Raskolnikov’s waiting is my waiting which I lend him. Without this impatience of the reader he would remain only a collection of signs.” ----- I really appreciate Sartre on this point: readers awaken the words and sentences on the page, inventing and completing characters and scenes with their own feelings, emotions, ideas, intuitions and past experiences. Thusly, the work of art is rounded out, made whole and complete by a community of readers. Harry Haller receives a new, more expanded life each time I reread Hesse’s novel “Steppenwolf”.

“Thus, for the reader, all is to do and all is already done; the work exists only at the exact level of his capacities; while he reads and creates, he knows that he can always go further in his reading, can always create more profoundly, and thus the work seems to him as inexhaustible and opaque as things.” ----- Has anybody ever reached the bottommost level of Robert Musil’s “The Man Without Qualities”? I suspect a reader could spend an entire lifetime rereading this novel and discover new, deeper dimensions and meaning with each successive study. There are a number of novels I have reread multiple times, “The Stranger” and “Siddhartha” come immediately to mind and this has certainly been my experience – I have never reached the bottom; there is always more to learn and appreciate.

“And since this directed creation is an absolute beginning, it is therefore brought about by the freedom of the reader, and by what is purest in that freedom. Thus, the writer appeals to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work. The book does not serve me freedom, it requires it.” ----- Sartre underscores how we are required to bring our freedom to our reading. On important aspect of freedom is openness of mind. If we find ourselves disinclined to read a novel by an author with a different sexual orientation or cultural background then ourselves, for example a novel like “Season of Migration to the North” by the Sudanese author Tayeb Salih where he explores cultural confrontation and racism, we might want to reflect on exactly how open-minded and free we really are.

“The characteristic of aesthetic consciousness is to be a belief by means of an engagement, by oath, a belief sustained by fidelity in one’s self and to the author, a perpetually renewed choice to believe. I can awaken at every moment, as I know it: but I do not want to: reading is a free dream.” ----- Reading is a generosity, a giving oneself completely to a character and story, a gift to the writer. We can have mixed feeling reading an unsettling work, say a story of a child experiencing the horrors of war in a novel like Jerzy Kosinski’s “The Painted Bird” or a Thomas Ligotti tale of terror, but we keep turning the pages, keeping our free dream alive since we value our readerly commitment and engagement.

“The work can be defined as an imaginary presentation of the world insofar as it demands human freedom. The result of which is that there is no “gloomy literature”, since, however dark may be the colors in which one paints the world, he paints it only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it. Above all, the unique point of view from which the author can present the world to those freedoms whose concurrence he wishes to bring about is that of a world to be impregnated always with more freedom. ----- Is there ever enough freedom in the world? Sartre thinks there is always room for more freedom – thus, more literature, more books.

Final note: I have cited works of fiction since, for the most part, Sartre uses fiction as examples throughout his book (Sartre famously disliked poetry). However, when he speaks of literature, not only is Sartre referring to novels and stories but other types of creative writing such as poetry, plays, essays and, yes, reviews.

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