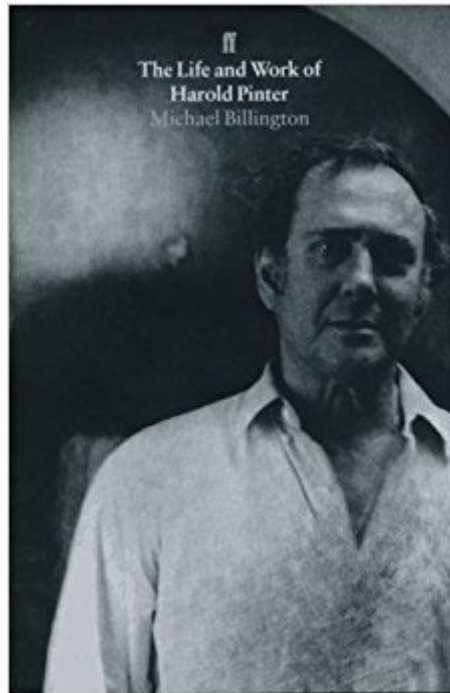


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The Life And Work Of Harold Pinter



Synopsis

Harold Pinter is our foremost living dramatist; and in this ground-breaking book - the first authorized biographical study - Michael Billington examines Pinter's work in the context of his life. Pinter's plays, including such acknowledged masterpieces as *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, are subjected to close textual scrutiny and are seen to spring from a mixture of experience, memory and the unfettered poetic imagination. Billington's book also demolishes the myth that Pinter's political commitment is either belated or aesthetically detrimental; the dramatist is seen from the outset as a vehement opponent of authoritarian structures.

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Customer Reviews

London theater critic Michael Billington draws on interviews with the noted British dramatist, his friends, and coworkers to explore the links between Harold Pinter's life and works like *The Birthday Party* and *Betrayal*. He discovers a good deal of autobiography, as well as political commentary on the power struggle implicit in male-female relations. The account of Pinter's youth in London's East End and his close friendships with other smart, iconoclastic Jewish boys is especially good. Intelligent and accessible, this is a fine theater biography for the general reader.

Billington's exhaustive critical biography of one of Britain's major modern playwrights is long on literary analysis and shorter on biography. Billington discusses nearly all Pinter's major plays at length, from his earliest forays (e.g., *The Room*, *The Dwarfs*) to the famous *Birthday Party* and *The*

Homecoming and beyond. The book's most fascinating sections explore the sources, literary and biographical, of Pinter's evocative, cryptic plays. Billington's analysis relies heavily on the hidden (and sometimes not so hidden) political messages in Pinter's work, and they are there, although if the plays were only complaints against authoritarian regimes, they would be a lot less interesting. As hinted above, Billington's portrait of Pinter feels incomplete, especially appearing, as it does, side by side with his fine literary scholarship. You can't help wondering how much more Billington might have turned up about the man if Pinter were not still a living force to be reckoned with in the English-speaking theater. Jack Helbig

Harold Pinter was perhaps one of the few dramatists to have an adjective named after him: the term 'Pinteresque' is still used to describe a certain kind of dramatic writing, in which the pause assumes as much significance as the word. Yet Pinter was so much more than just a dramatist: beginning his career as an actor in touring productions, he was also heavily involved in politics, as well as becoming an Associate Director of London's Royal National Theatre. Billington's biography of him, published while the author was still alive, is definitive: based on extensive research as well as the author's own experience of witnessing Pinter's plays in performance, it traces the author's life from his childhood in Hackney, East London to his pre-eminent position in world theater. Highly recommended.

The book is an excellent summary of Pinter's life and work. Billington has captured Pinter's essence. I had a special interest in his relationship with Antonia Fraser, and the book deals with it tastefully.

A thoughtful and admirably complete survey of Pinter's life and career so far, even if it betrays the signs of being an "authorized" biography. I say so far because the author makes it very plain that Pinter is far from a spent force, either creatively or politically. Given the tiresome and almost ritualistic bollocking (a very Pinteresque word) he receives in the British press every time he signs a petition or attends a protest, the book comes on like a stern corrective, exposing the thoughtless double standard for what it is. Far from being a relatively recent fashionable pose taken by a celebrity intellectual, Billington makes clear that Pinter's political outspokenness is an organic consequence of his work in the theatre, which was essentially political from the start. Pinter's plays have followed a slow arc since the late fifties from the domestic to the more specifically political, but the overriding concern has been the same - the potential for language to conceal rather than to

reveal meaning, even to corrupt our need to hope that transparency between people is attainable. Hope for Pinter lies in the potential for resistance to this process through imaginative identification with the sufferings of others. If I have a criticism, it is the author's tendency to overstatement in sometimes irritating contrast to his subject's famous economy. Also, that the equivalence between personal intimate action and political reality comes a little too easy. I mean what does the phrase "sexual Fascism" (p. 377) really mean? I suspect that a victim of actual political Fascism wouldn't find that glib metaphor so easy to digest. Such phrases, which appear here and there in the book, would seem to be an example of the verbal laziness that Pinter himself spends so much time fighting. However, thanks are due to this author for constant emphasis on the actual performance of Pinter's texts, whether written for the screen or the theatre. Billington's comment and analysis of the performances are always insightful and interesting.

Having nearly walked out of "The Room" at the Almeida theatre in London, I determined to find out more about Pinter. This book sets the context and is a must for anyone new to Pinter or - like me - too young to have grown up with his work. The account of his early life in London's East End, and subsequent years as an actor in repertory theatre, are especially interesting. The Grocers school in Hackney was outstandingly successful in bringing out the best in its pupils - educationalists today can learn so much from it. And in turn we can learn so much from Pinter about what it's like to be the "outsider" in a closed society. And his plays are so evocative of their vintage - it's hard to believe for example that as recently as the mid-1950s in England it was perfectly legal for a landlord to place a sign outside a house saying "To let - no blacks or Irish". The book also reveals Pinter's huge courage and passion in arguing for causes in which he believes. A wonderful book about a man who can justifiably claim to be one of the world's leading playwrights.

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