



# The Double Bond: The Life of Primo Levi

*Carole Angier*

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# The Double Bond: The Life of Primo Levi

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**The Double Bond: The Life of Primo Levi** Carole Angier

**One of the most eagerly awaited biographies of recent years: a searching life of the great Italian writer and witness to the Holocaust**

Perhaps the most important writer to emerge from the death camps, Primo Levi spent sixty-five of his sixty-seven years in Turin, Italy, where he worked as a chemist by day and wrote at night in a study that had been his childhood bedroom. Thanks to his memoirs, which include *Survival in Auschwitz*, *The Reawakening*, and the classic *The Periodic Table*, he became widely known and loved as a supremely moral man, one who had transmuted the agonies of persecution into understanding and clarity. The whole world was shocked when he died in 1987, apparently having thrown himself into the stairwell of the house in which he had been born.

Carole Angier has spent nearly ten years writing this meticulously researched, vivid, and moving biography, which illuminates the design of Levi's interior life : how he lived as a man divided, not only between chemistry and writing but between hope and despair, and how the duty to testify released him to communicate, which was his deepest need.

**Carole Angier's** biography of Jean Rhys (1990) was shortlisted for the Whitbread Biography Award and won the Writers' Guild Award for Non-Fiction. She is the Royal Literary Fund Associate Fellow at the University of Warwick, and lives in Oxfordshire.

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"[A] vastly detailed and intricately layered biography . . . Meticulous and visionary . . . Angier's critical appreciation is to my mind flawless."—**Richard Eder, *The New York Times Book Review***

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"Compelling and beautifully written . . . Ms. Angier's book is devoted to capturing the inner man as much as the outward circumstances of his life . . . [Her] detailed account of the ordeal in the camps is painstakingly presented and told with a respectful care."—**Erich Eichman, *The Wall Street Journal***

"Brilliantly unorthodox . . . [Angier] is Levi's perfect biographer—a natural foil for his own reluctance to reveal his real self—and her work is the perfect complement to his, daring and justified in each of its own liberties . . . Her book is a remarkable success. Not only for its own achievement, but also because it restores to Levi's life the dignity his death seemed to betray."—**Alex Abramovich, *The Village Voice***

"*The Double Bond* has the pace and grip of a thriller. I could hardly put it down from the start to finish. Primo Levi was a natural storyteller whose fearful experiences in Auschwitz and elsewhere made him a great writer, and one of the twentieth century's prime witnesses. It cost him all he had to give. Carole Angier explores the dark secrets of his life and work with humane and moving clarity. She uses the unknown and unknowable as key structural elements—like holes in lace—in a biographical design as rich, intricate and mysterious as the nature of the man it mirrors."—**Hilary Spurling, author of *The Unknown Matisse***

"Carole Angier has solved the almost intractable problems which Primo Levi sets the modern biographer, with penetrating and audacious ingenuity. Using his own literary methods and complementing them, with intelligence and imagination, she gives us new insight into his character. His great mission was to bear witness during the last half of the twentieth century. Her inspired re-creation of his life and work will assist him to continue doing so well into the present century. It is a subtle and extraordinary achievement."—**Michael Holroyd, author of *Lytton Strachey***

"Angier's life study succeeds because, beyond its diligence and probity, it is an exhaustive exercise of moral imagination. She openly subjects many of her own insights and conjectures to the question of how her subject might have reacted to them."—**Kenneth Baker, *The San Francisco Chronicle***

"Angier's long, gripping narrative of Levi's time in Auschwitz synthesizes the best of his memoirs, poetry, fiction, essays, and scientific writing. She shows and tells that he was 'not just a great witness but a great artist; and the first because the second.' Just as compelling is her discussion of the moral issues he raises about the 'gray zone' of human behavior, the shame of the drowned and the saved, the roles of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. A compelling biography and a must for all Holocaust collections."—**Booklist (starred review)**

"Carole Angier's definitive biography of Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi (1919-87) will be superseded only if the immediate family speaks out and Levi's private papers are made public. Angier traces Levi's life and friendships with care and great respect, exploring the psychological aspects of his relationships with his wife and his mother and the composition of such works as *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Periodic Table*. All the great names from Levi's writings on the camps are here Lorenzo, Pikolo, Alberto as Angier interviews the living, revisits the scenes, and reads Levi's work intensely. Ten years in the making, this book alternates between chapters of straightforward narration, with a close reading of Levi's works, and chapters of Angier's personal observations and thoughts about Levi. The passages on Auschwitz and Levi's suicide are invaluable additions to our understanding of this important author's work. Essential for Jewish studies and literature collections."—**Library Journal**

"Angier deftly fills the lacunae with recollections and anecdotes drawn from her research. Her skillful narrative illuminates not only the painful, dramatic passages of her subject's life his work in the partisan resistance, his extraordinary survival in Auschwitz but also the decades after the war that Levi spent as a chemical specialist in varnishes and resins, quietly issuing works of literary genius every now and then. Always sensitive to the historical context of her subject, Angier provides a macroscopic view of the war from the perspective of Italian Jewry. But she also explicates some of the more difficult, ambiguous aspects of Levi's temperament: his fear of women, his tendency to see chemistry as a metaphor for life, the fierce determination to bear witness that underlay his gentle nature, and the inner torment that eventually drove him to suicide. Anyone moved by Levi's accounts of heroism

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