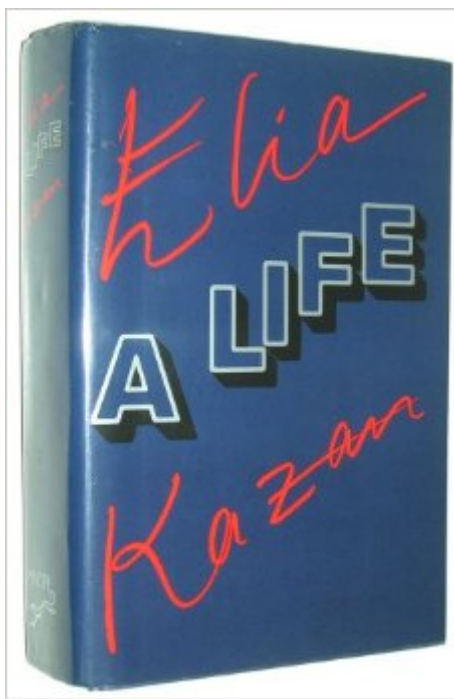


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Elia Kazan: A Life



Synopsis

Elia Kazan's varied life and career is related here in his autobiography. He reveals his working relationships with his many collaborators, including Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, James Dean, John Steinbeck and Darryl Zanuck, and describes his directing "style" as he sees it, in terms of position, movement, pace, rhythm and his own limitations. Kazan also retraces his own decision to inform for the House Un-American Activities Committee, illuminating much of what may be obscured in McCarthy literature. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

Before I read this book, I knew a little about Elia Kazan. For example, I knew that he had been a successful Hollywood film director in the late forties and early fifties. Indeed, I had seen some of his films: East Of Eden, in particular, came to mind. I had also read somewhere that he had also been a prominent and successful theatre director on Broadway; that he had given the likes of Marlon Brando and James Dean their first starts; that he was one of the influential people behind the advent of the Method Acting style; and finally, that he had been a 'friendly' witness-that means naming names, of course--at the HUAC hearings in the early fifties: what a snake, I thought!But hey, I've now read the book, and I know the real story and the real Elia Kazan. The book is an 800+ page epic. And an epic in every sense of the word. Kazan's autobiography is a long, brooding, and fascinating recall of his eventful life. He has, as he acknowledges in the later pages, lived a

variegated and full life, he has no regrets about any of it, and he realises that he has been fortunate to have led such an interesting life. And 'interesting' it certainly is. The book, though, is no glamorous odyssey of a life lived in Broadway and Hollywood; neither is it a chronicle of the great and the good of America's creative talent. Yes, there are valuable insights and vivid portraits of people like Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando and John Steinbeck. You will also meet some of Hollywood's movie moguls, particularly Darryl Zanuck at Fox. Yes, those stories are told, but all in the context of the main enterprise: the laying down for posterity of the intimate detail of the life of one of America's most celebrated creative talents of the middle of the twentieth century. Kazan unashamedly reveals his inner thoughts, his recollections, reasons, reminiscences and experiences-whether they show him in a good, bad or indifferent light. The book is brutally frank and you can only admire the author's unstinting honesty-possibly a cathartic aspect to the work aided Kazan along the way. Remarkable for a book of this size, there is never a hint of unevenness or flagging. It's an enthralling, engrossing book from start to finish. Much of life's rich tapestry, to use the euphemistic cliché, is explored here. Kazan is clearly an astute and perceptive observer of life. Life essentially means human beings, of course, and this brings us to the essence of the book, human nature, particularly the behaviour between man and woman. Manipulation, expediency, lust, deceit, hurt, love, the passion and the platonic: it's all here in a very stark black and white. Yet still the book continually sparkles, even when the reader faces some genuinely sad and pitiful moments, particularly relating to Kazan's fiercely supportive and loyal first wife, Molly. There is no cherry-picking of 'the good times' in this book: highs and lows, triumph and disaster, they all co-exist side by side. Kazan doesn't shirk from revealing his overwhelming determination at the time to have his cake and eat it ie. a loving wife at home and a passionate mistress outside. Apart from the inherent problems that male/female relationships spawn, if you forgive the pun, Kazan also talks extensively about his rather frustrating and unfulfilling time at college; his less-than-perfect relationship with his father; reflections on the life of a Greek immigrant family trying to make their way in the 'new world', in this case, New York; more reflections on Greeks, this time those living in another 'foreign' country, Turkey (where Kazan's parents had emigrated from), and the altered behaviour necessary to survive amongst 'the enemy'; and, of course, he describes the whys and wherefores of his 'friendly' HUAC testimony, and the subsequent vitriol directed against him as a consequence from many quarters, including so-called 'friends'; we learn of the unsavoury modus operandi of both the Communist Party in America and the HUAC authorities in the late forties and early fifties; and Kazan's single-mindedness and determination as, post-HUAC, he persevered and

produced his best work as a film director; also, an interesting account of how Kazan's second wife, Barbara, and her confused but brave struggle against cancer; and so on. The book is a courageous and brutally honest self-expose, if you like, of a man who has remained largely silent over the years. He doesn't gloss over his extra-marital activities, and the hard-heartedness and guile required on his part to maintain his passionate love for his mistress and, at the same time, his more platonic love for his first wife. This reflects the 'insoluble' (Kazan's word) nature of man's relationship with the opposite sex. The book is beautifully-written-quality throughout--and the prose intimate, inviting and lucid. The honesty and intimacy of Kazan's words, as he describes his thoughts, feelings and rationale at the time, ensure that you live his life with him, and by the end of the book, you also feel you've been through one hell of a life. Over a year ago, I read an excellent book called *A Child Of The Century*, Ben Hecht's autobiography, published in the fifties. I never thought I'd read another autobiography to match or surpass it. I have, and it's called *A Life*, by Elia Kazan. Waste no more time and buy this book. Alternatively borrow it or steal it, but whatever you do, read it!!

Kazan has written a stunningly truthful autobiography that should be read and savored. Here is "Gadge" an icon of mid-century American theatre and film spilling it out all over the page. From his unfulfilled teenaged longings for blonde American girls, to his first marriage in which he felt trapped, but stayed on and on, to the many affairs he indulged in, all are chronicled almost too graphically, but from a distinctly detached (a writer's?) point of view. One doesn't feel that he loved or even liked any of them. But so what? Here's a man who could brilliantly direct both *"Streetcar"* and *"Salesman"* in the space of a few years and then go to Hollywood and deal successfully with the likes of Darryl Zanuck and the 20th Century Fox grind-them-out-fast film factory. The Hollywood stuff is both funny and refreshingly honest. Who else has dared to challenge the Spencer Tracy was and remains the greatest screen actor legend? And then there's the deadly little aside about Marilyn Monroe giving him a not-so-subtle look as she sat quietly beside her then mentor, Johnny Green. The sainted Tracy as an out of shape, lazy and not very dedicated actor, and the "vulnerable" Marilyn as a cunningly on-the-make tart who would have traded in her devoted agent for the famous director, given the slightest encouragement, are just two minor examples of the fascinating insights that appear on almost every page. It's a very fat book. It had to be. Kazan was in his eighties when he wrote it and he's led an extremely full life. It was a long and winding road from the Group Theatre to that uncomfortable, halting appearance at the 1999 Academy Awards ceremonies. They made him (and the latest wife) wait until almost the very end, but he made it through. And there was Nick Nolte remaining seated and staring mean and hard at this fragile old man. And there, too, was a smiling

Warren Beatty rising graciously and applauding. He redeemed himself that night. I'm sure the old man noticed.

One of the most honest, compelling, brilliant, wise books I've read. Kazan's life was awe-inspiring, and to have it retold with such lucidness and unflattering candour is a gift for the ages. Not only was he one of the greatest theatre directors and film directors of the 20th Century, he writes like a blessed demon. This was a spellbinding, page-turning read. Immersed in its pages, I learnt so much about life, America, directing, theatre/cinema history, and myself. I also learnt more than I've known before about how men think (wish I'd read this years ago). It's a pity Kazan's life became simplistically defined by one act, his artistry overshadowed - ironic, too, considering he made films with a compassionate, liberal humanity. You can look at his life through the prism of that one act, or read this for a richer, fuller, deeper understanding of Kazan - the good, the bad, the ugly. And the genius. This book made me want to live my life more fully, view myself less vainly, and create my work more honestly. Can't ask for more than that.

This book is perhaps one of the greatest autobiographies of the modern Theatre. Kazan pulls no punches in depicting his epic journey from Greek immigrant to one of the greatest theatre and film directors of all time. His life parallels the crucial artistic movements and conflicts of the Twentieth Century: The Group Theatre, The HUAC hearings, The height and fall of the Hollywood Studio System, the founding of the Actor's Studio, and the development of the American Theatre. Kazan, along with Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams played a crucial role in creating a strong and vibrant American Theatre. All throughout this amazing journey are insights into the craft of acting as well as the trials and tribulations of a man struggling for personal identity. This book demands to be on the shelf of any student, practitioner or fan of the Theatre. Five out of five stars

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