



Georges Perec: A Life in Words : A Biography

David Bellos

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This is the first complete biography of Georges Perec (1936-1982), novelist, poet, verbal gamesman, master puzzler a man at once eccentric, brilliant, and endearingly ordinary, whom Italo Calvino called "so singular a literary personality that he bears absolutely no resemblance to anyone else."

Perec's novels are widely regarded as modern classics, but his linguistic mastery actually extended to a stunning variety of forms: from autobiography, drama, and criticism to crossword puzzles and the world's longest palindrome. Ever in search of new verbal challenges, he wrote one novel entirely without the letter e; and in 1978 he published the monumental, structurally complex *Life A User's Manual*, which many critics have placed (in the words of *The Boston Globe*) "on the level of Joyce, Proust, Mann, Kafka, and Nabokov."

In *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, David Bellos, Perec's award-winning English translator, introduces the enigmatic figure behind these remarkable works, showing how Perec's experiences led to such masterpieces as *Life*, the celebrated *Things*, and the harrowing *W* or *The Memory of Childhood* the latter inspired by his parents' deaths during World War II (one of them at Aushwitz) and by his own sense of guilt as a survivor.

Using unpublished documents and firsthand interviews, Bellos details Perec's tragic childhood, his difficult apprenticeship, his emergence into literary renown, and finally his death from cancer at age 46. He traces the influences of Perec's Polish-Jewish background, and of the friendships with such figures as Calvino, Raymond Queneau, Harry Mathews, and others that helped shape this extraordinary life. He offers privileged insights, born of many years' reflection and study, into Perec's vertiginous works. He situates Perec as a primary figure of French intellectual life in the 1960s and 1970s, due in part to his collaborations with the radically inventive OuLiPo group (whose name condenses the emblematic phrase "Workshop of Potential Literature"). And he shows the painstaking process by which a phenomenally gifted writer, suffering from a sheltered past crippling emotional burden, reconstructed his life in the only way he knew how: in words.

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