



Talking with Sartre: Conversations and Debates

From Yale University Press

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What would it be like to be privy to the mind of one of the twentieth century's greatest thinkers? John Gerassi had just this opportunity; as a child, his mother and father were very close friends with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and the couple became for him like surrogate parents. Authorized by Sartre to write his biography, Gerassi conducted a long series of interviews between 1970 and 1974, which he has now edited to produce this revelatory and breathtaking portrait of one of the world's most famous intellectuals.

Through the interviews, with both their informalities and their tensions, Sartre's greater complexities emerge. In particular, we see Sartre wrestling with the apparent contradiction between his views on freedom and the influence of social conditions on our choices and actions. We also gain insight into his perspectives on the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and the disintegration of colonialism.

These conversations add an intimate dimension to Sartre's more abstract ideas. With remarkable rigor and intensity, they also provide a clear lens through which to view the major conflagrations of the past century.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

With a decidedly political focus, these lively and candid conversations from the early 1970s between the famed French philosopher and his godson are a fascinating glimpse into Sartre's efforts to reconcile existentialism with Maoism and his own increasingly revolutionary leanings. That Gerassi (*Jean-Paul Sartre*) is clearly on close personal terms with his subject is always apparent, and this allows for wonderfully frank accounts of Sartre's childhood, various affairs and women, as well as asides about his drug use and bizarre, recurring hallucinations of crabs. The author incessantly returns to political questions, examining Sartre's various left-wing commitments, his views on Soviet Russia, Cuba, the Israel-Palestine conflict, in addition to the broader questions of how social conscience relates to art and whether a doctrine of absolute individual freedom can be made compatible with Sartre's emphasis on collective action. This can make for repetition and occasional tedium that could easily have been remedied by more disciplined editing and a less ideologically strident framework. Still, as a document of both the thinker and the man, the volume paints a revealing picture of a restless mind in profound engagement with the philosophical and political crises of its time. (*Dec.*)

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Review

“Gerassi's conversations with Sartre are a treat, unprecedented in the voluminous Sartre archives. This is the unguarded Sartre; he forgets the tape recorder. We see it all—the voracious curiosity, political passion, probing honesty, self-deprecating humor, and bragging machismo. Some of the greatest gems are his passing comments. In between the lines we see into his soul.”—Hazel Rowley, author of *Tête-à-Tête: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*

(Hazel Rowley)

“*Talking with Sartre* is like no other interview book that I've ever read. Sartre's genius and fire figure on every page, often interwoven with the personal details that make his life every bit as interesting as his writings. Gerassi's insightful and argumentative probing brings out the very best in Sartre. A masterpiece, an absolute delight to read.”—

Bertell Ollman, New York University

(Bertell Ollman)

About the Author

John Gerassi, currently professor of political science at Queens College, City University of New York, is the author of *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated Conscience of His Century*.

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