



The High Mountains of Portugal by Yann Martel

About the author:

Yann Martel is the author of *Life of Pi*, the #1 international bestseller and winner of the 2002 Man Booker (among many other prizes). He is also the award-winning author of *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* (winner of the Journey Prize), *Self, Beatrice & Virgil*, and *101 Letters to a Prime Minister*. Born in Spain in 1963, Martel studied philosophy at Trent University, worked at odd jobs—tree planter, dishwasher, security guard—and traveled widely before turning to writing. He lives in Saskatoon, Canada, with the writer Alice Kuipers and their four children.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

About this book:

The High Mountains of Portugal is a suspenseful, mesmerizing story of a great quest for meaning, told in three intersecting narratives touching the lives of three different people and their families, and taking us on an extraordinary journey through the last century. We begin in the early 1900s, when Tomás discovers an ancient journal and sets out from Lisbon in one of the very first motor cars in Portugal in search of the strange treasure the journal describes. Thirty-five years later, a pathologist devoted to the novels of Agatha Christie, whose wife has possibly been murdered, finds himself drawn into the consequences of Tomás's

Nov. 10, 2016



quest. Fifty years later, Senator Peter Tovy of Ottawa, grieving the death of his own beloved wife, rescues a chimpanzee from an Oklahoma research facility and takes it to live with him in his ancestral village in northern Portugal, where the strands of all three stories miraculously mesh together.

Beautiful, witty and engaging, Yann Martel's new novel offers us the same tender exploration of the impact and significance of great love and great loss, belief and unbelief, that has marked all his brilliant, unexpected novels.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

Discussion Questions:

1. In *The High Mountains of Portugal* as in, say, *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel explores the discrepancy between reality and myth. How do you see this discrepancy play out in this novel? Talk about the ways in which what the eye sees differs from what the soul knows.

2. What is the title's significance? Consider the fact that Tomas arrives in Portugal to find a "treeless steppe" and Peter Tovy finds a "barren savannah," There's not a peak in sight for either man.

Nov. 10, 2016



3. Why does Tomas decide to walk backward? Talk about this passage:

Walking backwards, his back to the world, his back to God, he is not grieving. He is objecting. Because when everything cherished by you in life has been taken away, what else is there to do but object??

Does this statement ring true...or is it misguided?

4. Once Tomas finds his crucifix, how does it reveal or reflect his personal anger toward God?

5. Follow-up to Question 3: What are the consolations for profound loss and grief explored and hinted at by Yann Martel in *The High Mountains of Portugal*?

6. Martel combines pathos with humor, especially with Tomas and Peter. Where in the text does he do so...and, most of all, why? Why the juxtaposition of sadness with laughter.

7. Of the three quests, which did you enjoy reading most?

8. What is the symbolic significance of the chimp in each of the stories? How are each of the men changed by the chimp?

Nov. 10, 2016



9. Discuss how religious faith is considered in this novel. Consider, for instance, these questions asked by Lozora's wife:

Why would Jesus speak in parables? Why would he both tell stories and let himself be presented through stories? Why would Truth use the tools of fiction?

How would you answer her? What is the connection between faith and storytelling? How does this novel link them?

10. How does Peter Tovy's life and story finally weave all three stories together? Or does it? Do you feel satisfied with the way the novel ends?

11. Do you enjoy Yann Martel's whimsy and his heavy dependence on metaphor? Or do you find his work difficult to grasp, perhaps even arcane? Does his use of symbolism and magical realism deepen your understanding of his themes...or confound you?

Source: *Lit Lovers* (<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/10548-high-mountains-of-portugal-martel?start=3>)

Other formats available at Halifax Public Libraries:

- Audiobook (on CD)
- eBook
- Large Print

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