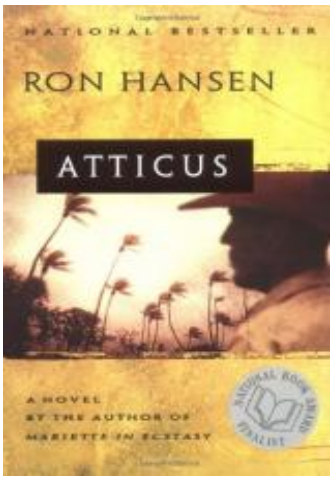
Atticus

by Ron Hansen



About the Book

> She told him, "When I was in college I read a folktale about a father pursuing a son who'd run far away, from one world to the next. The father called to him, 'Please come back!' But his son looked across the great gulf between them and shouted to him, 'I can't go that far!' So his father yelled to his son, 'Then just come back halfway!' But his boy replied, 'I can't go back halfway!' And finally his father shouted, 'Walk back as far as you can! I'll go the rest of the way!'" - *Atticus*

Sixty-seven-year-old oilman and rancher Atticus Cody returns home one day before Christmas just in time to see a yellow taxicab heading away from his white two-story house. Yelling "Who's there?" but receiving no reply, he enters to find his forty-year-old son, with sunburnt face and hair bleached platinum by the sun, sitting in his father's green wingback chair. "Merry Christmas," Scott says to his astonished father.

So begins this novel of separation and return, hurt and forgiveness. An alcoholic wanderer and artist, Scott has recently settled into a life of reckless partying and drinking among a group of expatriates and Mexicans living in the town of ResurrecciÛn on the Caribbean coast. It is a parasitic existence, in stark contrast to the lives of his upright father and older brother Frank, a highly regarded state senator with a perfect wife and four children.

Not long after Scott returns to Mexico, Atticus receives a phone call from Renata Isaacs, Scott's former girlfriend, telling him that Scott has committed suicide. Atticus goes down alone to ResurrecciÛn to recover Scott's body. Yet as his journey unfolds, Atticus's memories of and longing for his son become interwoven with his search for answers to why his son died and, ultimately, who his son was. In Resurreccion, Atticus and Scott achieve a reconciliation of abiding love and forgiveness that, as Hansen suggests, is what keeps our world from falling apart.

"The goal of writing is [to be] as clear and beautiful as possible, trying to produce symmetry and harmony out of chaos--like medieval carvers who were trying to imitate what angels would do on earth." - Ron Hansen

Discussion Guide

1. On the first page of the novel, Atticus Cody sees the illusory vision of two suns--a sundog. This motif of doubling is one of the ways Hansen structures and unifies **Atticus**. Among the character pairings, in which the doubles are twins or opposites, are Scott-Reinhardt, Scott-Frank, Scott-Atticus, Atticus-Stuart, Atticus-Renaldo, Renata-Serena, and Serena-Carmina. What is the relation between the two characters in each pairing? How do these pairings contribute to the larger themes of the novel? What is symbolically suggested by the motif of doubling, with reference to ideas about identity? Fate?

2. Another instance of doubling in **Atticus** is in the novel's two main settings: Antelope County, Colorado and Resurrección, Mexico, along the Caribbean coast. How does Mexico function symbolically in relation to North America? Why do so many North Americans and Europeans settle there--what are they seeking? What do they find? What is the draw of Mayan culture and ritual for Scott? What is the impact of the expatriate community upon the locals? How do the Mexicans and expatriates regard one another? What is Mexico's effect on Atticus? What does it mean to return to Colorado after encountering this symbolic Mexico?

3. Hansen has said this is a novel "about forgiveness." The novel's main example of forgiveness is the father who forgives his prodigal son. What are the sins of the son that must be forgiven? Can we distinguish between Scott's sins--between his sins of commission or omission? Sins deliberately done or accidentally? Could you forgive Scott if he were a family member or friend? Are there things for which Atticus requires forgiveness from Scott?

4. A related theme of the novel is the nature of love. Think of Scott's mother's final words, "Oh honey, no," and Atticus's first words to Scott after the accident, "Are you okay?" Although Scott remembers them with shame, his parents' words demonstrate their loving connection to their son, even in the midst of catastrophe. What different kinds of love are portrayed in the novel? What makes some sustaining, while others appear to be primarily destructive? Or is ambivalence inherent in all love?

5. The novel suggests that "The House of He Who Invents Himself" is ultimately an underworld tomb, where homeless, nameless beggars dwell in "loss and impermanence." Why is this? What is Hansen suggesting about the relation of the individual to memory, family, and community? What are the responsibilities beyond self-preservation or self-invention that each of us have? What are the consequences of turning away from these responsibilities?

6. The novel unfolds by showing the ways a settled life--Atticus's in Colorado--can be tilted off balance by a sudden, unexpected event. But by the end of the novel, balance has been restored and Atticus resettles himself in Colorado, where he is eventually rejoined by his son. To achieve this, Hansen uses Scott's monologue (Part Six) and the brief Part Seven to tie up the loose threads of the murder mystery and disclose "the hidden value x that would solve the algebra of this boy" that lie at the center of the book. Do you feel that the conflicts in the novel are resolved too neatly? Do you feel that the happy ending is forced? unconvincing? Or that the structure of the moral parable underpinning the novel is inadequate to deal with the complexities of contemporary life?

7. The novel focuses on a troubled father-son relationship. Are there clues in the novel as to the origins of this vexed relationship? What are the conditions or problems that seem to have set Atticus and Scott at odds? Are father-son relationships difficult in ways that mother-daughter relationships are not? What do you feel the future might hold for Atticus and Scott?

8. On another level, the father-son relationship alludes to God the Father in relation to humanity. In what ways does the novel develop this overtly religious theme?

Author Bio

Ron Hansen is the author of 10 novels --- including MARIETTE IN ECSTASY, DESPERADOES and A WILD SURGE OF GUILTY PASSION --- and two short story collections, among them SHE LOVES ME NOT. His novel THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. He graduated from Creighton University in Omaha and went on to the University of Iowa Writer?s Workshop where he studied with John Irving. He is now Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., Professor in Arts and Humanities at Santa Clara University in northern California.

Critical Praise

" What are the limits of forgiveness? The Christian conceit is that there are none. 'Absolute' is the nature of absolution, and the parable of the prodigal son might be summarized this way: A son behaves absolutely unforgivably; his father forgives him absolutely. The godliness implied in so perfect a pardon suffuses the intricate design of ... Atticus. The reader is allowed to understand every nuance of the son's guilt, reasoning and regret, cannot quite absolve him and is shamed by the spectacle of the father who can. It is a rich and disturbing experience. "-***Janet Burroway, New York Times Book Review***

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