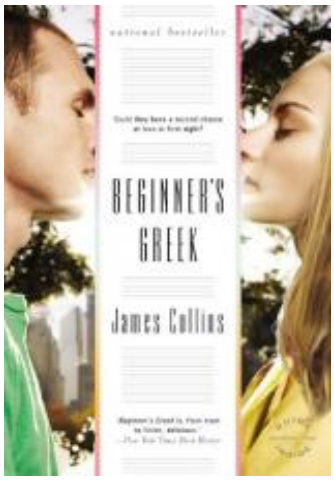
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Beginner's Greek

by James Collins



About the Book

Is love at first sight possible or just an old-fashioned romantic idea? And what if, to further complicate things, you meet the love of your life and then lose her phone number? Then what if, after the impossible happens and you find her again, she's now about to marry a roguish lothario who is also your best friend? The complications don't end there for Peter Russell, the winning hero of James Collins' charming, generous, and romantic first novel. Part modern-day Jane Austen, part Tom Wolfe, **Beginner's Greek** is a romantic comedy of the highest order, with characters who are perfectly, charmingly real as they swerve and stumble from fairy tale to social satire and back again.

Discussion Guide

1. At the beginning of the novel, Peter Russell is convinced that he will meet and fall in love with a beautiful young woman aboard a plane, and then Holly sits down next to him. Later, Peter reflects that it must have been fate. Do you agree that Holly and Peter were fated to be together?

2. Peter sees Holly reading Thomas Mann?s novel The Magic Mountain, and the two of them bond over the book. Why do you think James Collins chose this particular novel as the catalyst for Peter and Holly?s relationship? If you were sitting next to a stranger on a plane, what book in the stranger?s hand might have a comparable effect on you?

3. Early in the novel Peter reflects that happiness in a committed relationship is ?the result of grueling, arduous, unrelenting effort? (page 19). How do his opinions evolve? Do you find Peter?s attitudes about love and happiness to be true to life?

4. When Peter marries Charlotte, he ?could not think of a single reason not to have married her? (page 100). How does this union compare with others in the book? If Jonathan had survived, could Peter and Charlotte have been happy together?

5. If Peter?s best friend, Jonathan, hadn?t met and charmed Holly, it seems unlikely that she and Peter would ever have reconnected. What do you think of Jonathan?s role in the story --- and his sudden demise?

6. Jonathan?s young female fans are eager to know how it is that he writes so well from a woman?s point of view. Parts of **Beginner?s Greek** are written from the perspective of various female characters. Do you think these passages are rendered as successfully as the passages told from Peter?s perspective? Name some other works of fiction that you think manage to capture particularly well the perspectives of both men and women.

7. At different points in the novel Julia and Charlotte both reflect on beauty, and particularly on what beauty means for women. What role does beauty play in Beginner?s Greek? Discuss how beauty relates to art --- in life and in literature.

8. Soon after her divorce proceedings begin, Julia realizes that she?s in a unique position to help Charlotte live out her dream, though Julia would do so at great personal risk because of her ruthless, soon-to-be-former husband. Why do you think Julia takes this risk?

9. Peter and Holly are both said to be ?good? in some essential way. What constitutes this goodness? When in the novel does a sense of moral obligation conflict with the pursuit of happiness?

10. An underlying theme of the novel is the power of money. At the dinner at Arthur Beeche?s extravagant mansion, Peter sits next to Lisa Eisler, a hero in humanitarian work. Eisler says, ?I figure that somebody should lead the life Arthur does? (page 318). What do you think of this statement? Do you agree with her?

11. Among other conversational tours de force at the Beeche dinner is Peter?s recital from memory of a poem called ?Beginner?s Greek? by James Merrill. Why do you think James Collins chose this as the title of the novel? How would you interpret Merrill?s line, ?What is / Beyond analysis / Is perilous??

12. When Peter is asked for his definition of love, he says, ?When two people are in love, they are parallel lines. That intersect? (page 324). Do you agree?

13. Like many Victorian novels, **Beginner?s Greek** ends with a marriage. Could this book be said to be a Victorian novel of sorts? How so --- or why not?

14. If you had to write an epilogue to the novel, how would you envision these characters? lives five years down the road?

Author Bio

I was born in Manhattan and lived there all my life, except for going away to school, until a few years ago, when I

moved with my family to rural Virginia. I loved growing up in New York, not so much because of anything specific that I did, but because I just loved being there. I liked the streets, the buildings, the people. I still love it for the same reasons: when I go back, which is often, I enjoy being there because I enjoy being there, and the things I do --- going to museums and hearing music --- are less important (although they are important).

I wanted to be a writer for as long as I can remember, and I wrote my first collection of poems in a small blue spiral notebook when, I think, I was seven. In school my strengths were subjects like English and History and I wrote for literary magazines and so on. In college, though, I had a difficult time in general and was able to write almost nothing. When I graduated, I hadn't established a record that would lead to a literary career (or any career), and there were practical reasons for me to try working on Wall St., so I did. I thought to myself that it would be easier to go from that to writing and that the experience would be helpful if I did ever make the change.

In due course it became clear that I was unlikely to make much of a mark in the world if finance, and a friend helped me get a job as an editorial assistant at a publishing house (Little, Brown, of all places), where I worked briefly. I was mortifyingly older than the other assistants, but I felt much more at home in this setting than I had previously. Then, after writing a piece for it, I was hired at *Spy* magazine, where I wrote and edited a great deal, and so felt as if I was catching up on years' worth of lost experience. After *Spy* I worked at *Time* for several years, editing the arts and foreign news sections and writing on various subjects.

My wife grew up in Virginia and had always wanted to move back there and live in an old house with lots of land. Also, we had two young daughters and my wife had a hard time imagining what it would be like to raise them in the city. So, after a good deal of reasoned and mutually respectful discussion, we bought an old house with some land in Virginia. I left *Time* and started to write a few things for *The New Yorker* and we moved. We live in a very beautiful area, and while I don't have much experience with nature, I do appreciate it. Every day, while driving or taking a walk, I see something that astonishes me: wild roses by the road, a tree silhouetted against the yellow evening sky. I sometimes think that, as a city boy, I enjoy it all more than people who grew up in the country. I like the friends I have made here very much; I've had dogs for the first time in my life; it has been good to live outside of New York and see life from a different perspective; contrary to what many people seem to expect, I am never bored; and I am surrounded by natural beauty, so the move has been a success. (But I still think that New York is the only place one earth that really matters.)

My favorite websites are not particularly "webby." I have read *The New York Times* every day of my life since I was ten and one of the things that makes it possible to live in the country is that I can read it online. I read other papers online, too; Slate and poets.org are the only true websites that I visit regularly, although I do use Wikipedia and google things several times a day.

The book that has probably been more important to me than any other is a paperback copy of **The Viking Portable James Joyce**. I got it in eleventh grade and it is at this moment sitting on my desk. In the last few months I have made two acquisitions that are thrilling and engrossing and make me speechless with awe: the complete stories of Chekhov and the Arkangel complete Shakespeare on CD. All the performances in the Shakespeare recordings are incredibly good and it is a revelation to hear the words spoken rather than to merely read them, and the set allows you to hear plays like *Timon of Athens* or *Henry VI pts. 1-3* that you would never be able to see performed.

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