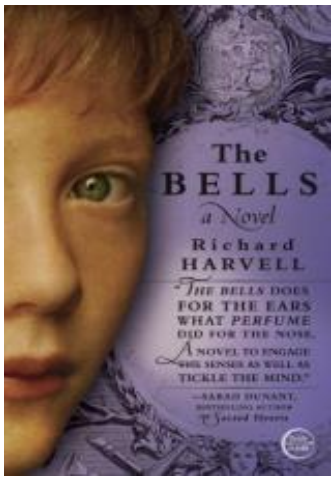
The Bells

by Richard Harvell



About the Book

Born in a belfry high in the Swiss Alps, Moses Froben and his deaf and mute mother ring the beautiful church bells each day. The townspeople assume Moses is also deaf, but shaped by the glorious music of the bells, he actually possesses a singular sense of hearing that makes him privy to any number of sins --- and puts him in grave danger. Moses finds refuge in a monastery?s choir and becomes its star singer, but he falls under the power of a man who will do anything to preserve Moses? angelic voice forever.

In this letter to his son, Moses recounts his life as a novice monk, the power and beauty of the music he loves, and a story of forbidden love.

Discussion Guide

1. Harvell begins his novel with a letter from the narrator?s son Nicolai, in which we learn a great deal, including that Nicolai never knew his mother and that in 1806 Moses is a famous singer. How does this affect our experience of the novel? How would the novel be different with these two pages torn out?

2. Moses? years at the Abbey of St. Gall are tumultuous and fraught with pain. But would you say he wishes Nicolai had never brought him there? What does he gain from the abbot and abbey? Aside from the obvious in his castration, what does he lose?

3. Moses calls Ulrich ?the architect of my tragedy? (208). And yet, his life would have been so different had he never been castrated --- we certainly would not be reading the story of this famous singer. Is his regret complete? Does he blame Ulrich? How would his life have been different had he not been castrated?

4. In an interview, Richard Harvell says, ?I first planned Nicolai and Remus, as two cruel monks, and then, as I wrote,

they just wouldn?t be mean, no matter what I tried. I had to make them good. I am very thankful for that.? Why are Remus and Nicolai so important to Moses? story? Why do you think Harvell is so thankful that they are not ?mean??

5. ?This is not magic,? Harvell writes (14). ?He cannot hear through mountains or to the other side of the earth. This is merely selection. The selection of sounds, the *dissection* of sounds, is something he can do like no other. This his mother and her bells have gifted him.? How would you describe Moses extraordinary hearing ability? Is this magic? How does Moses? hearing influence his destiny?

6. While Harvell uses many visual images in the book, there are many descriptive passages relying on sound. ?The one-eyed idiot?s howling, the rattle of the coppers in the leper?s wooden bowl, the creak of the warped wagon wheel, the hissing of a black cat plucked of half its fur by some disease? (217). How does description through sound add to the novel?

7. Gaetano Guadagni is one of the many historical figures in the novel. Is he a villain, or is he, as he always claims to be, Moses? ?fratello? (brother)?

8. One reviewer claimed that **The Bells** ?earns its operatic tone? (*Kirkus Reviews*). What might be meant by ?operatic tone?? In what other ways is the novel like an opera?

Author Bio

Richard Harvell was born in New Hampshire, USA, and studied English literature at Dartmouth College. He now lives in Basel, Switzerland, with his wife and son. THE BELLS is his first novel.

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