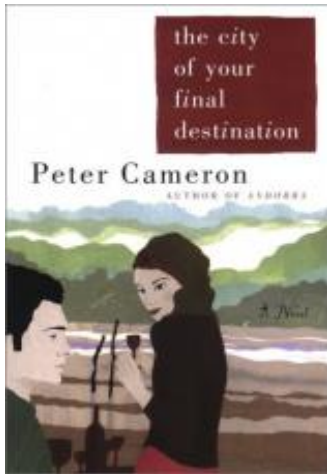


# The City of Your Final Destination

by Peter Cameron

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## About the Book

Upon reading **The City of Your Final Destination**, one gets the sense that the author has spent years in Uruguay studying his surroundings in great detail. In truth, Cameron never set foot there, although his writing is as seamless as though he were a native. His alluring South American setting, moreover, provides the perfect backdrop for the novel, its searching, eccentric characters, and the issues they all face.

**The City of Your Final Destination** is the story of Omar Razaghi, a doctoral student at the University of Kansas who, due to a serious lapse in judgment, is forced to embark upon a life-altering journey.

A kind-hearted but directionless academic, Omar has received a grant from his university to write a biography of deceased Latin American author Jules Gund. This grant has been paid to Omar based upon authorization to write the book- authorization he claims to have-but in truth, has delinquently requested. His life takes a turn for the worse upon hearing from the executors of the Gund literary estate (comprised of Gund's wife, Caroline; his brother, Adam; and his mistress, Arden), that his request for authorization has been denied. Faced with the probability of losing his fellowship, and prodded by his overbearing girlfriend, he makes an unannounced trip to Uruguay in an attempt to convince the Gund clan otherwise. Omar's intrusion into these characters' lives provides the catalyst for the novel, and becomes a vehicle by which we're able to scrutinize each person's desires, motives, and fears.

Each individual, Omar included, is forced to confront why they do or do not want this biography. In effect, his crusade to write about the life of one man reveals the biographies of both himself and those he beseeches. Despite the strength of the complex, vulnerable and well-drawn characters, it's the author's writing style and use of language that take center stage in this novel.

Cameron possesses an uncanny ability to write around the character, and his talent for providing just enough insight to allow us to draw our own conclusions is superb. The language is often ironic with overtones of deep emotion, and the

author flows back and forth between pain and longing and humor with ease. Such strong prose facilitates the larger issues found in the novel—namely, the concept of and motives behind a biography, the search for happiness, and the time-honored themes of loss and love.

## Discussion Guide

1. Discuss Omar's decision to travel to Ochos Rios without sending advance notice. Is spontaneity part of his character? What other factors are behind the decision? Compare and contrast Omar before and after his journey—what's changed about him; what's stayed the same?
2. Discuss the relationship between Caroline and Arden. What are their similarities and differences? Is there significance in the fact that the wife and mistress of the same man live under the same roof?
3. Throughout the novel, Caroline proves herself adept at making others question themselves and their motives. At one point, she forces Omar to confront his entire mission: "But I am not a bad person, Omar told himself. I have no ill intentions. What I want to do is perfectly acceptable and morally innocuous. He put his face in his hands. But why did God invent Caroline?" (Chapter 11) Does Caroline's rigidity help or harm Omar? Is her skill at disarming people effective with all characters in the novel? How does Adam react to her? What about Arden?
4. Initially, each member of the Gund literary estate has their own individual reasons to support or withhold authorization of Jules' biography. What do these reasons say about each individual's character? What motivates each to withhold or support as they do? Of the three members of the Gund family, who carries the most weight, in your opinion, in deciding for or against the biography?
5. In considering her actions throughout the entirety of the novel, what is your opinion of Deirdre? Do you think that her motives for pushing Omar to go to Uruguay were legitimate? What was the turning point of her relationship with him, which eventually led to their break-up?
6. Delve a bit into the author's writing style. You may want to consider a scene from Caroline's return to New York City (chapter 23) or when Pete brings Omar and Deirdre to Tacuarembó on their way home (chapter 19). How do these characters' inner monologues bring out larger themes and issues in the novel?
7. At one point in the novel Omar claims that there can never be a truly "objective" biography, and that "biography is a hoax" (chapter 7). What does he mean by these statements? Do you agree or disagree with his belief? Discuss the role of biography in novel; how does Omar's desire to write a biography affect the members of the Gund family?
8. Consider the author's choice of locales for the novel: Uruguay, Kansas, New York City (and to a lesser extent Germany and England). How does location figure in the events of **The City of Your Final Destination**? What if Omar had come from a different university? What if the Gund family lived in the United States?
9. Discuss the role of each of the male characters in the novel: Pete, Adam, Dr. Peni and Omar. Whom among these do you find the most intriguing? Do you feel that any of these men are satisfied or truly happy with their lives?

**10.** Discuss the scene in chapter 10, wherein Adam Gund reflects upon the loss of beauty and charm with age: "There is something a little pathetic about ending up old and beautiful and charming, I think; it indicates, to me at least, a waste of resources, or at the very least, a serious misappropriation of them. For charm and beauty are more valuable commodities in the young. There's little the ancient can buy with them." Could this be construed as a criticism of other characters in the novel? Why or why not? Are the others affected by Adam's pronouncements? How is he different from the other inhabitants of Ochos Rios?

**11.** What role, if any, does symbolism play in **The City of Your Final Destination**? Discuss among the group, for example, the role of the gondola, or Omar's fall from the tree, or Caroline's "tower." What deeper meanings could these events or items hold?

**12.** Should Omar have, in the end, written Jules Gund's biography? What do you think would be some possible outcomes of the novel, of Omar's life and the lives of the Gund group, if he proceeded and did write the biography?

**13.** Pete, Adam's faithful yet restless companion, plays a unique role in the novel. What's your opinion of Adam's relationship with Pete? Where do you see Pete going in the future?

**14.** Children often provide objective insights into a person's character. Consider Portia's relationships with the individuals in the novel. What truths does she reveal about them?

**15.** If you could write a biography of one character from **The City of Your Final Destination**, who would it be? Why?

## Author Bio

Peter Cameron is the author of *Andorra*, *The Weekend*, and the short story collections *One Way or Another* and *Far-Flung*, the best stories of which are collected in *The Half You Don't Know* (all available in Plume editions). His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Grand Street*, and *The Paris Review*. He also works for the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. He makes his home in New York City.

## Critical Praise

"Cameron's finely crafted novel continues to surprise until the final pages?Readers have much cause to be grateful for his slyly arranged enchantments."

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