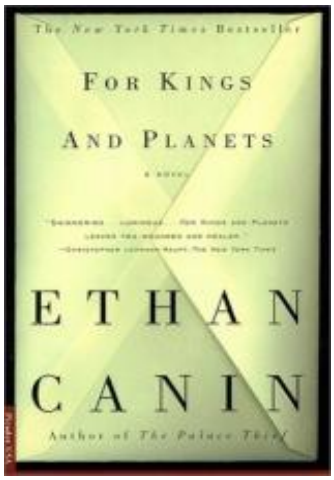
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

For Kings and Planets

by Ethan Canin



About the Book

From the celebrated author of **The Palace Thief** and **Emperor of the Air** comes this stunning novel about the relationship between two very different men and a woman they love. Orno Tarcher travels from a small town in Missouri to New York City, where he strikes up a friendship with Marshall Emerson, a charismatic and brilliant New Yorker who lives in a world Orno never would have imagined. And in that seductive world, as he gradually comes to know it, Orno finds both desperation and glamour, destruction and love.

Discussion Guide

1. In many ways, **For Kings and Planets** is an examination of friendship. What kind of friendship do Orno and Marshall have? Why are these two seemingly different people drawn together in the first place? How does their relationship change as the novel progresses?

2. The juxtaposition of cities and rural communities figures prominently in Ethan Canin?s novel. Discuss the importance of New York in Orno?s life. Does his perception of that city alter as he grows older? How? What about Cook?s Grange? Why do you think he ultimately decides to settle in the small town of Preston, Maine? What is the significance of Marshall?s decision to move to Los Angeles?

3. On page 210, Marshall tells Emerson, ?Nobody changes. They just reveal themselves.? What do you make of his argument? Does it apply to everyone in **For Kings and Planets**? Does it even apply to Marshall himself, or do you think he in fact changes?

4. Throughout the novel, Orno struggles to maintain his moral center. How do his brushes with what many would consider immorality--his experimentation with cocaine and his infidelities for example--affect him? What do these conflicts tell us about Orno? Marshall does not seem to aim for uprightness like Orno does. What do we learn about

morality from Marshall?s ambivalence toward it?

5. Canin writes on page 244, ?When he [Orno] came up again, a moose appeared at the edge of the trees. Preston was awfully far south for one, but it wandered down near him and drank, its broad humped shoulders rocking. He felt visited: chance and mystery, the unknowable course of days.? How does this passage relate to the novel as a whole? What does Orno learn about chance, the consequences of making choices, and his own power to carve a path for his life?

6. Marshall Emerson and his father have photographic memory, yet they both consistently misrepresent themselves and fabricate the events of their past. What do Professor Emerson?s lies about his family roots and Marshall?s own invented stories reveal about them? What do these two characters tell us about the nature of truth and memory?

7. On page 181, Simone tells Orno that she?s ?just the girl who warns the onlookers and keeps her hair pinned up while the ship is sinking.? Discuss Simone?s role in her family. What is her significance to Marshall and Orno?

8. **For Kings and Planets** is largely about fathers and sons. How do Orno?s and Marshall?s respective relationships with their fathers function in the novel? Describe how Marshall?s understanding of his father changes and what that shift ultimately teaches him about himself.

Author Bio

Ethan Canin is the author of seven books, including the story collections EMPEROR OF THE AIR and THE PALACE THIEF, and the novels AMERICA AMERICA, FOR KINGS AND PLANETS and CARRY ME ACROSS THE WATER. He is on the faculty of the Iowa Writers? Workshop and divides his time between Iowa and northern Michigan.

Critical Praise

"Brilliant?richly lyrical?An homage to the Golden Age of American Romanticism. "

For Kings and Planets
by Ethan Canin

Publication Date: October 1, 1999
Paperback: 352 pages
Publisher: Picador
ISBN-10: 0312241259
ISBN-13: 9780312241254