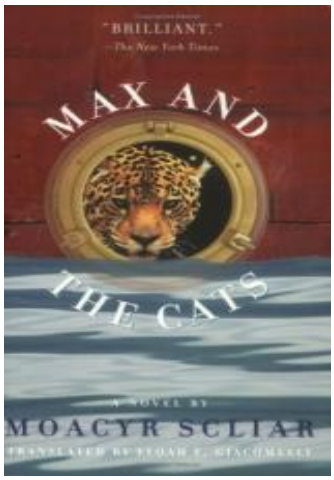
Max and the Cats

by Moacyr Scliar



About the Book

In September 2002, Moacyr Scliar's **Max and the Cats** became the focus of a controversy in the literary world. At that time, Yann Martel had just won the *Man Booker Prize*, Britain's top literary award, for his book **Life of Pi**?the premise of which was taken (admittedly by Mr. Martel) from **Max and the Cats**. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Scliar, a Brazilian of Jewish heritage, expressed his concern that although Brazil produced "a world-class literature that ought to be recognized on its own merits, we only get attention when something extravagant like this occurs." Yet despite Mr. Scliar's misgivings, the uproar surrounding **Max and the Cats** is very much a positive for readers, since it calls to the forefront a wonderful and panoramic novel?one that may well bring Brazilian authors the attention they deserve.

Max and the Cats is the story of Max Schmidt. Born in Berlin in 1912, he is brought into the world just in time to experience some of the most ominous and terrifying events of the 20th century. Max's father, a furrier, is an overbearing, forceful man, who taunts his son to show strength and be less of a coward. Shy and pensive, Max takes refuge in the storage room of his father's store; there he reads travel narratives and "at his mother's insistence, Goethe and Schiller." Whether from his travel readings or his surroundings, it's here that Max develops an intense, strange fascination with felines. This forms the backbone of the story, as cats of various types (whether real or imagined) come to symbolize the traumatic events of Max's life.

As a young man still working in his father's store, Max is seduced by an older female co-worker. When their liaison is exposed by the woman's husband?a Nazi?Max is forced to flee Germany for Brazil. Thus begins an odyssey which catapults him quickly into manhood, and where he is at every turn forced to confront the demon of the Nazis (many of whom have themselves moved on to new lives in Brazil).

Max and the Cats simply and seamlessly embraces whole histories, cultures and worlds effectively in a short period of time. Within the span of 100 or so pages, Max has traveled from Nazi Germany to the New World, has mastered

Portuguese, has grown into a man and established a family and has come to terms with his tumultuous past. Scliar's prose, moreover, is simple and inviting, yet it compels the reader to meditate on Max's plight, his analytical nature and his constantly moving and often hilarious thought process (frequently, the reader must decide whether or not Max's adventures are merely fantasy).

In the end, this is an immensely enjoyable and engaging story; a parable that provokes thought and engages the reader from start to finish.

Discussion Guide

1. Max's connection with cats lies at the heart of the novel, and through the course of the story, he is confronted with three predominant felines. Compare and contrast the three "main" felines?the tiger, the jaguar and the onca. How does Max react to each of these animals? What does each cat symbolize?

2. Discuss the significance of Max's dreams. In the whole novel, Max has two major dreams, both involving his parents. How would you interpret these dreams? What latent emotions or meanings do these dreams convey?

3. How would you characterize the author's writing style? How does this style lend itself to the telling of the story? How does it support the larger themes established in the novel?

4. Discuss the roles of class and social standing within the novel. How does the Schmidt family's social status compare with that of Max's own as a landowner in Brazil?

5. Despite its simple, flowing structure, major themes are at play in **Max and the Cats**. What are some of the larger points made by the author; what are some of the messages you personally take away from the novel?

6. Discuss the character of Jaci. Why does Max initially fall for her? What is the significance of her Indian heritage? What does Max's relationship with Jaci say about Max?

7. Re-read the scene where Max visits the Jewish merchant (pp. 62-65). What do you feel is the purpose of this scene? What is the author driving at in this passage?

8. Analyze Max's relationship with is parents, in particular with his father. How does this relationship evolve over time? How would you characterize this relationship before and after Max flees Germany?

Author Bio

Moacyr Scliar was born in 1937 in the town of Porto Alegre, Brazil. The author of sixty-two books (translated into a dozen languages) and the recipient of numerous Brazilian literary awards, Scliar is recognized as one of the country's most outstanding writers of fiction. He is the author of **The Centaur in the Garden**, **The Carnival of Animals**, **The One-Man Army**, and **The Gods of Raquel**.

Critical Praise

"I am indebted to Mr. Moacyr Scliar for the spark of life."

Max and the Cats

by Moacyr Scliar

Publication Date: November 25, 2003
Mass Market Paperback: 128 pages
Publisher: Plume
ISBN-10: 0452284538
ISBN-13: 9780452284531