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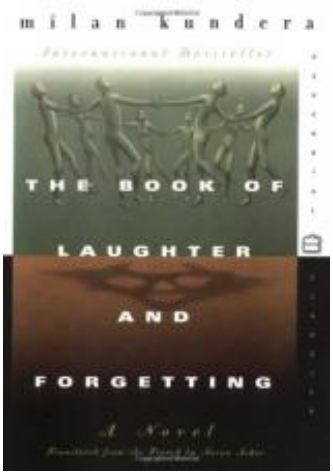
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

by Milan Kundera



About the Book

With its seven interrelated parts--rich in story, character, and imaginative range--*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978) is the novel that brought Czech-born Milan Kundera his first big international success. Aaron Asher's new translation, commissioned and monitored by Kundera himself, conveys beautifully into English the nuances and the tone of the author's original text. "Part fairy tale, part literary criticism, part political tract, part musicology, and part autobiography" (as the New York Times described it), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is, above all, the wonderfully integrated stories of men and women living in a world of public oppression and private longings, a world in which history may be rewritten overnight and in which love may fall victim to either political intrusion or personal betrayal.

The seven parts of Kundera's novel explore different aspects of human existence in the twentieth century, particularly as they are affected by life in the police state of the narrator's fictionalized Bohemia. In 1971, three years after the Russian occupation of his homeland, Mirek--under surveillance by the not-so-secret police--seeks to retrieve his love letters from his former lover, Zdena. Marketa and her husband, Karel, must cope with Karel's increasingly childlike mother while at the same time dealing with the amoral Eva and memories of past desires. At a small French summer school, two American girls learn the lessons of laughter. Displaced to a provincial town in Western Europe, Tamina ("all the other stories are variations on her own story") urgently tries to retrieve memories of her husband and their past together in Bohemia, memories recorded in notebooks that she left behind at her mother-in-law's house in Prague. And forty-five-year-old Jan prepares to cross several borders--geographical, existential, erotic--for a new life in the United States.

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting closes with a group of naked men and women on an isolated beach exchanging opinions about the fate of Western civilization and the liberation of humanity, opinions that "Jan had heard ten, twenty, thirty, a hundred, five hundred, a thousand times before." His own attempt to obliterate the border between past and present, and to re-experience the innocent and blissful mystery of his youth, fails. In the end, he finds himself squarely in the land of forgetting.

Discussion Guide

1. What kinds of laughter does Kundera identify? How is each related to personal and historical memory or forgetting? What makes Kundera's characters laugh? With what consequences? Is it true, as Petrarch insists in Part Five, that "love has nothing in common with laughter"?

2. What importance do you ascribe to the various sexual attitudes and activities of the characters? How are these attitudes and activities shaped or determined by personal objectives, familial background, politics, and/or social mores? To what extent are they expressions of rebellion against family, state, or history?

3. In Part Three, Kundera draws a distinction between "the police in the false unity (imposed, commanded) of the row" and "the young people in the true unity (sincere and natural) of the circle." How do these two "unities"--the row and the circle--appear throughout the novel? Which of the characters are associated with the row, and which with the circle? In what ways does the circle possess a "magical meaning"?

4. At the beginning of Part Four, Kundera writes of Tamina, the heroine of this section and of Part Six, that "I am more attached to her than to any other." Why is this so? What characteristics of Tamina's personality, life, and experiences might account for her creator's attachment to her?

5. In Part Five, Kundera defines litost as "a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery." What instances of litost do you find in the novel, and in what contexts? To what extent may litost be said to be the defining motif of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting?

6. What is the importance of Kundera's comments, in Part Six, on Beethoven's musical variations? How are Kundera's stories variations on Tamina's story, as presented in Parts Four and Six? How are they variations on the dual theme of laughter and forgetting?

Author Bio

The Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera was born in Brno and has lived in France, his second homeland, since 1975. He is the author of the novels THE JOKE, FAREWELL WALTZ, LIFE IS ELSEWHERE, THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING, THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING and IMMORTALITY, and the short-story collection LAUGHABLE LOVES --- all originally written in Czech. His most recent novels SLOWNESS, IDENTITY and IGNORANCE, as well as his nonfiction works THE ART OF THE NOVEL, TESTAMENTS BETRAYED, THE CURTAIN and ENCOUNTER were originally written in French.

Critical Praise

" *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* calls itself a novel, although it is part fairy tale, part literary criticism, part political tract, part musicology, and part autobiography. It can call itself whatever it wants to, because the whole is genius. "***-New York Times***"This book, as it bluntly calls itself, is brilliant and original, written with the purity and wit that invite us directly in. "

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