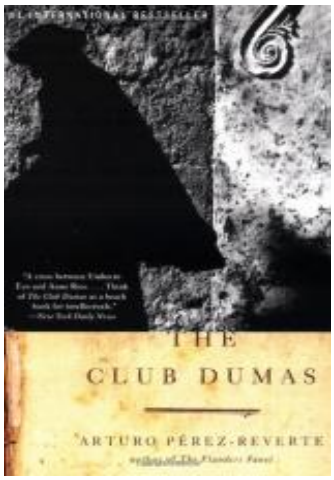
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Club Dumas

by Arturo Pérez-Reverte



About the Book

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading and discussion of Arturo Pérez-Reverte's novel, **The Club Dumas**. We hope they will enrich your understanding of this dazzling intellectual thriller.

Rare-book sleuth Lucas Corso is hired to authenticate a manuscript chapter from Alexandre Dumas's **The Three Musketeers**, and to find the original copy of a manual for summoning the devil. These assignments lead him into dangerous waters as he becomes the target of devil worshipers, unscrupulous bibliophiles, and a cast of characters that seems to come straight out of Dumas's masterpiece, complete with a femme fatale and her sinister henchman. Aided by an enigmatic young beauty named for Sherlock Holmes's nemesis, Corso follows the violent trail of Dumas and the devil across Europe as he begins to uncover the dark and horrifying secret linking the two books. Arturo Pérez-Reverte has woven a brilliant intertextual puzzler, at once sophisticated and playful, in the tradition of Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino.

Discussion Guide

1. "My name is Boris Balkan, and I once translated **The Charterhouse of Parma**. Apart from that, I've edited a few books on the nineteenth century popular novel, my reviews and articles appear in supplements and journals throughout Europe, and I organize summer school courses on contemporary writers" [p. 5]. What is unusual about the way Balkan introduces himself? Does his description of himself reflect his actions in the novel?

2. Corso is frequently described as resembling a wolf or a rabbit. Is either description an accurate depiction of his personality? Does Corso's character undergo a transformation by the end of the novel? And if so, what causes it?

3. Is Balkan a reliable narrator? How do you account for his detailed knowledge of Corso's activities? Why did Arturo

Pérez-Reverte choose to use Balkan as a narrator? Is Corso also a narrator of the story? Who is in control of the narrative?

4. When Corso visits Varo Borja at the beginning of the novel he hears a "jarring sound, warning him. . . . He was no longer sure he wanted the job" [p. 51]. Why does Corso take the job despite his reservations? How do his feelings about books differ from Varo Borja's or Boris Balkan's?

5. Corso immediately notices Liana Taillefer's resemblance to Kim Novak, the actress who portrayed a beautiful witch in the 1958 film **Bell, Book, and Candle**. Does Corso use a literary and cinematic lens to view the other women he encounters in the book? How does he see Irene Adler?

6. What do the rooms in which Liana Taillefer, Boris Balkan, Corso, Varo Borja, and Victor Fargas live say about each of them? Are the rooms in any way deceptive? With what settings do you associate Irene Adler? What does the home address she gives say about her?

7. Balkan is very opinionated when it comes to the kind of writing he deems worthwhile [see pages 5, 98, 313, and 322]. Do you think Balkan would consider **The Club Dumas** a worthwhile piece of literature? Why?

8. The Club Dumas does not establish a precise time period. What era do you imagine **The Club Dumas** to take place? Do certain characters seem to exist in their own historical periods? If so, how does this effect the way characters construct their identities and how they perceive one another?

9. What are the sources of evil in the novel? Is Pérez-Reverte's interest in the presence of evil in modern history conveyed in his depiction of Varo Borja's desire to raise the devil through magic? Is Borja naive in believing that summoning the devil requires secret knowledge?

10. To what extent do the engravings in **The Book of the Nine Doors to the Kingdom of Darkness** illustrate Corso's quest for the truth about the two books he is trying to authenticate? What do you think engraving number VII, of a king and a servant playing chess, might represent in terms of Corso's adventure? And how does engraving number IX, of a woman riding a seven-headed dragon, illuminate Corso's discoveries?

11. Who is Irene Adler? Do you accept her explanation of her identity? How does the identity she constructs affect your understanding of the opposition of God and the devil in the novel?

12. Balkan tells Corso that "games are the only universally serious activity" [p.314]. How does Balkan's attitude to "the game" compare with that of Corso, Liana Taillefer, and Irene Adler? Does anyone win the game? Has Corso's attitude to the game changed by the end of the book?

13. Boris Balkan argues that he never led Corso to believe that there was a connection between "The Anjou Wine" and **The Nine Doors**: "It was you who filled in the blanks on your own, as if what happened were a novel based on trickery, with Lucas Corso the reader too clever for his own good. Nobody ever told you that things were actually as you thought. No, the responsibility is entirely yours, my friend. The real villain of the piece is your excessive intertextual reading and linking of literary references" [p. 334]. Is Balkan right? To what extent are Balkan and Corso responsible for the violence that occurs in the story?

14. Is the Club Dumas justified in its mission to protect the reputation of Alexandre Dumas by withholding evidence about his collaboration with his assistant Auguste Moquet? Why does Balkan care so much about Dumas's reputation? Does Balkan's attitude toward Dumas influence your opinion of Balkan?

15. Corso and Balkan argue about whether children and young people raised watching television have the "spiritual heritage" they themselves received from books and old movies [p. 325]. Could **The Club Dumas** have been written about television devotees? How would the characters and plot differ?

16. Corso recalls Nikon telling him, "Films are for everyone, collective, generous. . . . They're even better on TV: two can watch and comment. But your books are selfish. Solitary. . . . A person who is interested in books doesn't need other people and that frightens me" [p. 210]. Is Corso a frightening person because of his obsession with books? What about the other characters who share a passion for books? Is it significant that Irene Adler reads cheap paperbacks [p. 138]? Why doesn't Corso want to join the Club Dumas party?

Author Bio

Born in Cartagena, Spain, in 1951, Arturo Pérez-Reverte inherited from his merchant-mariner father a love of travel and from his grandfather a library of some 5000 books. He has said of his childhood, "Between the ages of nine and fifteen I read everything one can read . . . Joseph Conrad, Stendahl, Defoe. I remember I was very fond of **Robinson Crusoe**. But now I find him a particularly disgusting figure. When he eventually finds another human being, all he does is make a servant of him." Once kicked out of school for hitting a priest (it was a matter of honor), Pérez-Reverte has since had a colorful and successful career. Working on oil tankers during the 1970s, he began writing for a Spanish newspaper, and in 1977 went on to become a television journalist. He has reported from Bosnia and many other war zones for Spanish state television. Two of his seven books have been made into films, and Roman Polanski plans to film **The Ninth Gate**, a movie based on**The Club Dumas** and starring Johnny Depp in the role of Corso. **The Flanders Panel** was ranked among the best crime novels of 1994 by *The New York Times Book Review*, and was awarded France's Grand Prize for Detective Literature.

Critical Praise

"Erudite, funny, loopy, brilliant . . . actiona-adventure spiced with dollops of idiosyncrasy--and some very good talk."

The Club Dumas

by Arturo Pérez-Reverte

Publication Date: March 17, 1998
Paperback: 362 pages
Publisher: Vintage
ISBN-10: 0679777547
ISBN-13: 9780679777540