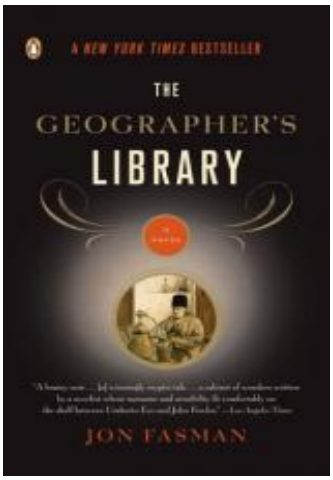
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The Geographer's Library

by Jon Fasman



About the Book

Stretching through time and around the world, **The Geographer's Library** is an accomplished debut from Jon Fasman. With his remarkable command of language and suspense, Fasman has crafted a novel that explores how interconnected lives and deaths across countless years can collide in a single moment.

Few humans are able to escape being swallowed up by history. What is comforting, however, is that history usually waits until after we are gone to completely consume us. Paul Tomm is not so fortunate. What seems to be a routine death in a quiet New England town soon unfolds across continents and centuries as it threatens to completely overwhelm him.

As a reporter for a small local newspaper, it is Paul's job to compile an obituary for a reclusive old professor from Wickenden, Paul's alma mater, who was found dead at home. And so Paul begins the usually monotonous and uneventful task of gathering the necessary information. There is no family. The medical examiner has a few questions about the immaculate condition of the victim's internal organs, but that line of questioning ends abruptly with the doctor's unexpected death by a hit-and-run driver. Another of Paul's sources, a thirty-one-year-old (and rather attractive) young lady, proves to offer more in the way of companionship than a scoop.

But there is clearly more to this story than a few lines in the obit column. Who made the anonymous call reporting the death? A macabre threat left on Paul's front door makes it clear that there is a larger story, a story that doesn't want to be written. With a little help from his gruff but caring editor, a former professor, and a small-town cop who cannot seem to stay out of trouble, Paul begins to unravel a story that becomes more mysterious with every new detail. As he investigates, the reader becomes acquainted with a series of objects that tell the history of alchemy and is offered chilling glimpses of life in the former Soviet Union, where even a person's very breath is not his own.

As the body count increases, Paul begins to feel more and more pressure --- from gentle to violent --- to call off his fact-finding mission and let the dead bury the dead. His stubbornness, fueled by a drive to further his career, threatens not

only to end his newfound relationship but nearly costs him his life.

Discussion Guide

1. Many people believe alchemy is merely about trying to turn lead into gold. But there is a rich tradition of alchemy running through many disciplines --- from religion to chemistry, from literature to psychology. What are some examples?

2. Paul gets very close to one of his sources almost immediately. Do you think this is merely due to his lack of experience or might there be some other issues involved? What do you think would have happened to Paul if he had kept a professional distance between them?

3. What sort of picture does Fasman paint of life in the Soviet Union

4. Do you think Paul is afraid of his own ambition? How might the events of the novel limit or narrow his career?

5. Hannah's asking Paul to write down everything that happened sounds vaguely similar to the request made of an Estonian poet in the novel. Despite Tonu's promises, do you think Paul is still in grave danger?

6. Discuss the narrative device of having chapters end with descriptions of the objects from the library.

7. Looking back, Paul remembers several instances when he should have paid more attention to Hannah's strange behavior (for example, when they first meet Tonu together). Reflect on the various occasions in the novel when greater vigilance about odd behavior might have had a decisive effect.

8. There is very little interaction between the novel's characters and their families. Why do you think this is the case?

Author Bio

Jon Fasman was born in Chicago in 1975 and grew up in Washington, D.C. He was educated at Brown and Oxford universities and has worked as a journalist in Washington, D.C., New York, Oxford, and Moscow. His writing has appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Slate*, *Legal Affairs*, *the Moscow Times*, and *The Washington Post*. He is now a writer and an editor for *The Economist*'s website.

Critical Praise

"One of the year's most literate and absorbing entertainments."

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