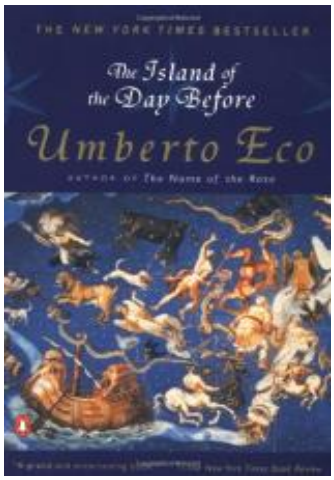
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Island of the Day Before

by Umberto Eco



About the Book

After a violent storm in the South Pacific in the year 1643, Roberto della Griva finds himself shipwrecked-on a ship. Swept from the Amaryllis, he has managed to pull himself aboard the Daphne, anchored in the bay of a beautiful island. The ship is fully provisioned, he discovers, but the crew is missing.

As Roberto explores the different cabinets in the hold, he remembers chapters from his youth: Ferrante, his imaginary evil brother; the siege of Casale, that meaningless chess move in the Thirty Years' War in which he lost his father and his illusions; and the lessons given him on Reasons of State, fencing, the writing of love letters, and blasphemy.

In this fascinating, lyrical tale, Umberto Eco tells of a young dreamer searching for love and meaning; and of a most amazing old Jesuit who, with his clocks and maps, has plumbed the secrets of longitudes, the four moons of Jupiter, and the Flood.

Discussion Guide

1. Roberto is naive, impressionable, impulsive, loyal, honest, and self-deluded. What do you think of him as a hero of the story? Is he an everyman? Do you think Eco wants the reader to identify with Roberto?

2. Eco describes Roberto as absorbing knowledge "as if he were a sponge, and was not distressed at believing in contradictory truths. Perhaps it was not that he lacked a taste for system; his was a choice." What does Eco mean by this? What do you think of Roberto's various teachers ? Saint-Savin, Padre Emanuel, Salazar and Saletta, Father Caspar ? and the way Roberto acquires and uses his knowledge?

3. What do you make of Ferrante, Roberto's imagined brother? How do his escapades shape and move the story along? Do you think Eco is making a point about the creative process? The imagination's vital role in our lives?

4.Roberto becomes the willing disciple of a number of teachers but takes much of what they say at face value ? learning, as it were, in a vacuum. Yet, once stranded on the ship, he must put his own intellect to use. What is Eco telling us about knowledge gained through intuitive versus empirical reasoning?

5. In matters of romantic love, Roberto is a naive but willing pupil. What do you think of the advice he is given on how to win the hearts of the women he desires? How real is his devotion for Lilia, a woman he doesn't really know?

6. Eco claims that all his novels are detective stories. How does he present this novel as a mystery? Is there a resolution? Is it satisfying or frustrating that Roberto never reaches the island?

7.How does Eco's use of comedy ? e.g., in the battle scenes during the siege of Casale; in the way Roberto pursues romance; and during his attempts to construct the Instrumentum Arcetricum with Father Caspar ? offset the more sober issues of war, love, and science?

8.When asked about the multiple layers of meaning and obscure references found in his work, Eco, in a 1995 interview, likened his novels to "club sandwiches.... You can decide to eat only one part." His apparent meaning is that a reader can appreciate many different facets of his books, that a reader need not be a scholar to "get" the meaning. What layers of this particular sandwich are most effective? Why?

9. How does Eco pit science against nature in the novel? What do you think of the many devices his characters invent ? are they technological advances or foolish attempts at understanding and gaining control over their world?

10. Father Caspar argues that he ? rather than Roberto ? should attempt to reach the island. "After all, I have the faith, and you not.' Roberto understood that this was not by any means the last consideration: it was the first, and surely the most beautiful." Yet Father Caspar's last invention ? and his mission ? are fatally flawed. What do you think Eco is condemning?

11. Why does Eco dedicate an entire chapter to the explication of the Orange Dove? What meaning does this symbol have to the story and to Roberto, stranded, alone, and with little hope for survival?

12. Roberto is within sight of an island he can't reach ? physically, because he can't swim, and theoretically, because the island exists the day before and he can't go back in time. What do you think the island's real and imagined inaccessibility stands for in the novel? How does Roberto's desire to reach the island compare with that of Father Caspar?

Author Bio

Umberto Eco (1932?2016) was the author of numerous essay collections and seven novels, including THE NAME OF THE ROSE, THE PRAGUE CEMETERY and INVENTING THE ENEMY. He received Italy's highest literary award, the Premio Strega, was named a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur by the French government, and was an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Critical Praise

"A gripping concoction of mystery, political intrigue, and adventure with generous doses of romance and comic relief.... Mr. Eco is a master storyteller. "

The Island of the Day Before

by Umberto Eco

Publication Date: November 1, 1996
Mass Market Paperback: 514 pages
Publisher: Penguin (Non-Classics)
ISBN-10: 0140259198
ISBN-13: 9780140259193