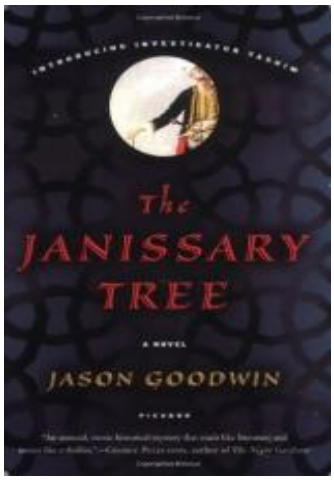
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Janissary Tree

by Jason Goodwin



About the Book

Set in 1830s Istanbul, **The Janissary Tree** offers an intimate glimpse into the exotic world of the late Ottoman Empire. The mood in the Empire is conflicted, wavering between the desire to regenerate the declining traditions which maintained the Empire for centuries, and the forces of change which seek to revolutionize the Empire and bring it into step with the modern powers of Europe.

Investigator Yashim finds himself hurled into the center of these struggles. A eunuch attached to the court of Sultan Mahmut II, Yashim is called upon to investigate the disappearance of four officers from the New Guard, the Empire's recently commissioned modern army. When the seraskier shows Yashim the grisly remains of one of the officers, the gravity of impending events suddenly becomes clear to him. Something very large and dangerous is about to happen. The ritualistic nature of the murder sets Yashim on the scent of the Janissaries, a supposedly extinguished group of mystical mercenaries who for four hundred years had been responsible for defending the Empire from its foreign enemies, and for maintaining law and order within. As Yashim follows this lead, the larger picture comes into focus, where the threat of revolution and counter-revolution looms just below the surface of everyday life in Istanbul. It's up to him now to find the kidnappers and save the Empire before it is too late.

Discussion Guide

1. As we find out early on, Yashim is a eunuch. What about his being a eunuch makes him different from those around him? How do people treat him differently? Do you think he is treated more like a relic from a lost era, or is he more or less treated just like everyone else?

2. How different would this story be if it were set in a more contemporary time? In what ways would Yashim's style of investigation be different? What are the most striking differences between Yashim's methods and those of a contemporary detective? Could you imagine Yashim in a modern setting? Could he be a character on a show like CSI?

Or is there something about his way of solving mysteries which doesn't fit in a modern scenario?

3. Why do you think Yashim and Palewski are such good friends? What is it about their personalities and their histories that makes them so well suited to one another? Would their friendship change if Poland were liberated during their lifetimes?

4. Why do you think Ottoman life was so regimented and ritualized, as with the master of the Soup Maker's Guild, who works passionately to keep novel ingredients out of all soup in Istanbul? Why do you think there was such a fear of novelty? How is crime investigation different in a culture which has so many codes and rituals? Is it easier or more difficult?

5. What was your impression of the shifting in narrative voice from one character to the next between the various chapters? Do you think the purpose of this was to give us an intimate view of multiple characters in Istanbul? Or do you think it was to show how people reacted to Yashim? Both? Neither?

6. What do you think motivates Yashim? Does Yashim have a passionate desire to see justice done? Is he motivated by a love of humanity? Duty? (e.g. p.95). Does he have multiple motivations? Is there anything petty that motivates him, or do you think his motives are noble?

7. There are multiple passages that talk about Yashim suffering, or being bitter (p.129, p. 253), or about what Yashim has to go through. What is it that makes Yashim suffer? Is it merely being a eunuch? Is it something else? If not, what about being a eunuch, in Yashim's time and place, could make him suffer so? Would you be bitter, or do you think you could learn to accept your condition without acrimony?

8. Part of Yashim's strategy as an investigator is to blend in, not to be noticed, not to call attention to himself (e.g. p.56). How do you think he does this? What is he trying to achieve through this sort of anonymity? Would he be able to pull off this sort of effect if he weren't a eunuch? Would he even have conceived of such a strategy if he weren't a eunuch?

9. What did you make of the conversational style of the dialogue? Do you think Goodwin opted for a more modern sound to make the world of 1830s Istanbul less foreign to contemporary readers? Or do you think that he was trying to illustrate to readers how people back then spoke in their own slang just as we do, and this is how they would have sounded to each other? Or do you think Goodwin had a different reason?

10. Do you think there's any possible compromise between the forces of change and the traditional? After ten years, could there not be a general amnesty for the Janissaries? Could not something of the Janissary mysticism and tradition make its way into the New Guard? Or can there be no middle ground? Who's right? What do you think would save the Empire? Which side do you think Yashim is most sympathetic to?

11. Did you expect the seraskier? Did anything in particular about his behavior make him seem suspicious? On p.286, he talks to Yashim about the necessity of forming an Ottoman Republic. What does he mean by that? Would such a thing have been possible? Do such ideas make him seem like a more sympathetic villain? Or is he merely a military dictator?

12. Do you think Yashim would have served under the seraskier if the coup had worked? Or was he too devoted to the Sultan? What would you have done in his place? Do you think that the Sultan deserves Yashim's loyalty?

13. Do you think that Yashim will change much as a person after his affair with the Russian princess? Will he become more confident? More masculine? Will such experiences help Yashim in his suffering? Do you think that Yashim will begin to seek out these types of relationships in the future?

14. What do you think would have had to happen in order for the coup to have been successful? Would there have been any possibility of it succeeding, given that the Russians, the New Guard, and the Janissaries all had a stake in it? What would you have done if you were the Sultan? How would you balance opposing forces, beat back your enemies, and bring about some sort of consensus?

15. What strikes you as the most exotic aspect of this book? The time-period? The culture? The place? Why does the world of **The Janissary Tree** seem exotic to modern Western readers? Does the exoticism of **The Janissary Tree** make Istanbul seem more inviting or more strange? Would you be interested in visiting Istanbul based on Goodwin's historical depiction of it in this book?

16. Yashim is a great cook --- and all the murders in **The Janissary Tre**e are, in effect, distorted recipes. Do you think cookery gives Yashim space to think? Is it part of his criminology, his method of detection? Or is it a means of escape, a way of relaxing? How do you think Goodwin uses food to draw us into Ottoman civilization as a whole? What kind of a cook do you think Yashim would be if this were set in contemporary America?

17. Jason Goodwin brings the city of Istanbul to vibrant life with well-researched historical detail. Would you consider Istanbul to be almost a character in the book, like Dickens's London? Or could the story happen almost anywhere? How does the setting affect the action and the atmosphere of the story? Was there anything about the city that surprised you? How do different characters --- Yashim, the seraskier, the Valide --- respond to the city in different ways?

Author Bio

Jason Goodwin lives in Sussex, England, is married with four children, speaks French and German, and once walked from Poland to Istanbul. His new novel, **The Snake Stone**, was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in October 2007.

Critical Praise

"A triumph of the first order."

The Janissary Tree
by Jason Goodwin

Publication Date: May 15, 2007
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Picador
ISBN-10: 0312426135
ISBN-13: 9780312426132