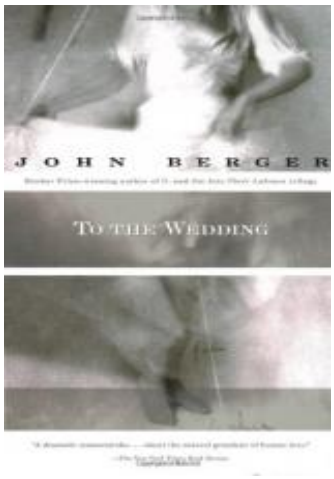
To The Wedding

by John Berger



About the Book

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are designed to enhance your group's reading of John Berger's **To the Wedding**. We hope they will give you a number of interesting angles from which to consider this beautiful and lyrical novel.

In **To the Wedding** John Berger offers us a sharply modern situation set in the traditionally pastoral and idyllic background of rural Europe. Beautiful, vibrant Ninon falls in love and becomes engaged to a young Italian, Gino, but soon before their wedding she discovers that she has contracted HIV through a brief encounter several years earlier. She tries to break the engagement but Gino, in an act of passionate and redemptive love, insists that the marriage will occur. The wedding itself, celebrated in a little village on the Po delta, becomes a magical feast in which all the novel's lost and searching souls, including Ninon's grieving father, Jean, and her mother, Zdena, a Slovakian intellectual who left Jean and Ninon many years earlier, are drawn into the joyful circle and regenerated by the power of Gino and Ninon's timeless love. Berger demonstrates that even the cruelest fate can be endured and even transcended through courage, love, and determination.

Discussion Guide

1. To the Wedding has an unusual structure: Berger has chosen to tell us how the story will end, rather than surprise us, and the characters fulfill destinies that have been mapped out for them early in the narrative. Why might this technique be appropriate for the kind of tale Berger is relating? It is the same technique that was used in ancient Greek tragedy; does **To the Wedding** strike you as a tragic story? Is it presented in a tragic way? If not, how might you classify it?

2. Why has Zdena left Jean and Ninon and decided to live alone rather than as part of a family? How have Zdena's political convictions formed her life, and do you believe that she has regrets about letting them do so? Do you think that she has failed as a mother, or has she instead succeeded, if in a rather unconventional way?

3. Why does Ninon's friend Marella call Ninon's ailment STELLA rather then SIDA (French, and Italian, for AIDS)? Why has she specifically chosen the word STELLA--what does it mean, and how might it help Ninon deal with her situation? Does Berger imply that the very word AIDS is impossibly stigmatized? Why does AIDS inspire the kind of visceral hatred expressed by the medical student who called Ninon "*puttana*" [p. 87]? Is this kind of hatred inevitable, or can attitudes be changed?

4. How is Ninon supported by community and family? Do you find that the village where the wedding takes place is presented as an ideal human community? If so, how does it contrast with the more urban environments described in the novel?

5. What is the significance of the Silicon Brotherhood [p. 125] within the story? What element of contemporary culture do they represent? What other utopian communities do they resemble?

6. A woman Jean meets during his journey remarks that the river beneath them is polluted. "It's we who have ruined it," she says, "we ruin everything" [p. 62]. What other examples of nature's despoliation can you find in the story? Berger repeatedly uses images of birds in his narrative. What do you think the presence of these birds expresses? Are they symbolic of nature, or of human souls?

7. How does ritual--for instance, the oath with the tamata, Jean's visit to the roadside shrine, and the wedding feast itself--serve to strengthen individuals and communities, to give shape and meaning to often painful lives? What other examples of ritual can you find in the novel, and why has Berger included them?

8. To the Wedding's landscape has been described as "post-Cold War." What features of it are specifically post-Cold War? In what way is this landscape appropriate to the story that is being told? How does the relaxation of political borders that has occurred during Ninon's lifetime parallel the transcendence of national and cultural boundaries that characterizes Ninon and Gino's story?

9. In what way does 1990s Europe, as described in the novel, differ from the Europe of fifteen years earlier that Ninon recalls from her childhood? Might Jean and Zdena's story be different had they come of age after the Cold War? "You'll never have," Zdena says to the teenage Ninon, "the future for which we sacrificed everything" [pp. 24-25]. Is this a sad statement, or a hopeful one?

10. In the bus to Venice, Zdena says to her new friend: "They say communism is dead, yet we've lost our nerve. We have nothing to fear and we are frightened of everything" [p. 140]. Of what are they frightened, and how does that fear manifest itself? Who, in the novel, overcomes fear and who does not? Is the fear inspired by AIDS a part of the larger cultural fear described here by Zdena?

11. What does Gino's father mean when he tells his son "Scrap isn't trash" [p. 100]? At what other points in the narrative does the idea of trash, or scrap, come up? Why has Berger chosen trash as a metaphor? Is it a metaphor you have encountered elsewhere in contemporary art, and why is it an appropriate one for our modern world?

12. What does Zdena learn from the taxi-driver she meets on her trip to Italy? How does he change her way of thinking? Does he succeed in making her understand the fact that we all live "on the brink" [p. 148], while yet imparting to her his own sense of hope?

13. Tsobanakos hears a chorus of voices saying "God is helpless. He is helpless out of love. If he had retained power he would not love as he does" [p. 90]. With what sense of God does Berger endow his novel? How do his characters define God and how does their sense of God's presence help them to live out their lives?

14. The Po River figures as an important place in the story--as the dangerous water through which Gino safely guides Ninon, as the source of the food for the wedding feast, as the site of the wedding itself. What does the river signify, to Berger? Why is it of such importance in the novel's scheme?

15. In the end, does Berger present death as an enemy or as an inevitable part of life? What is to be feared more than death? Has Ninon, through her marriage, conquered death or simply come to terms with it? Could she have done either of these things without the help of Gino?

16. Do you think that the narrator--a blind, Greek storyteller--is being compared with Homer? If so, what is Berger's purpose in giving his story such a narrator? Might Tsobanakos also be compared with the blind Tiresias of Greek mythology, who was accorded the gift of seeing the future? In what other ways does Berger use mythological elements to tell his story? Can you find parallels in the story with Orpheus, Adam and Eve, or other figures from mythology?

17. "I find the state of the world intolerable," Berger has said. "Not life. Not at all, but the way life is run. This is one aspect of my visceral being, and that probably determines to quite a large degree the choice of figures I write about--migrant workers and poor peasants or lovers, to whom the world is not often very welcoming". How does this statement apply to **To the Wedding**? Which aspects of the world Berger describes are intolerable, and which point to possibilities of hope and love?

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Author Bio

John Berger, novelist, painter, and art historian, was born in London in 1926. After serving in the British army from 1944 to 1946, he attended the Central School of Art and the Chelsea School of Art in London. He taught drawing from 1948 to 1955, and has continued to paint all of his life. His art has been exhibited at the Wildenstein, Redfern, and Leicester galleries in London.

In 1952 Berger began writing for London's **New Statesman**, and quickly became an influential Marxist art critic. Since

then he has published a number of art books including the famous **Ways of Seeing**, which was turned into a television series by the BBC. Beginning with his first novel in 1958, Berger has also produced a significant body of fiction, including **G.**(1972), winner of England's Booker Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In collaboration with the Swiss filmmaker Alain Tanner, Berger wrote the screenplay for **Jonah Who Will be 25 in the Year 2000** and two other screenplays. He is also the author of four plays.

For the past twenty years Berger has lived in a small village in the French Alps. Fascinated by the traditions and endangered way of life of the mountain people, he has written about them both in his fiction and nonfiction.

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