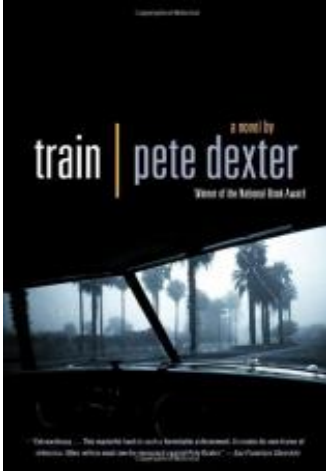


# Train

by Pete Dexter

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## About the Book

Train is a 18-year-old black caddy at an exclusive L.A. country club. He is a golf prodigy, but the year is 1953 and there is no such thing as a black golf prodigy. Nevertheless, Train draws the interest of Miller Packard, a gambler whose smiling, distracted air earned him the nickname "the Mile Away Man." Packard's easy manner hides a proclivity for violence, and he remains an enigma to Train even months later when they are winning high stakes matches against hustlers throughout the country. Packard is also drawn to Norah Still, a beautiful woman scared in a hideous crime, a woman who finds Packard's tendency toward violence both alluring and frightening. In the ensuing triangular relationship kindness is never far from cruelty.

In **Train**, National Book Award-winning Pete Dexter creates a startling, irresistibly readable book that crackles with suspense and the live-wire voices of its characters.

## Discussion Guide

1. The narrator tells us that even before Miller Packard spent five days in the ocean after the sinking of the *U.S.S. Indianapolis*, "he'd deliberately and often put himself in places where he saw awful things happen not only to people who deserved it but also to people who just seemed to stumble in at the wrong time" [p. 1]. Packard has a taste for provoking violence even before the nightmare of sharks in the Pacific, even before his leg is nearly destroyed in an attack by a dog [pp. 7-8]. Why is he addicted to violence, and how does the reader respond to this aspect of his character?

2. While Packard's habit of seeing himself "from a distance" [p. 3] suggests that he experiences what psychologists call dissociation, Train experiences something similar when he kills Mayflower with the leg of a chair: "It was still in his hand when [his mother] come back to the house and saw him in the kitchen, and saw what he'd done" [p. 91]. Train is consistently shown to be a character with a gentle and cautious nature; what makes him lose control and kill Mayflower? Does Dexter suggest that his characters are at the mercy of events that are simply unbearable?

3. Consider the way Dexter presents the characters' thoughts or self-expression. Train and Plural have much greater interiority than Packard and Norah. Their emotional lives are not only more fully imagined but also more accessible through the narrative point of view. Why has Dexter delivered his characters in this way; why do the black characters evoke more sympathy than the white ones?

4. "From his earliest memory," Packard'd "had a facility to see himself from a distance. Sometimes when he thought about it, it seemed like he'd been someplace else, watching himself, for most of his life" [p. 3]. Train calls Packard the "Mile Away Man." How does this aspect of Packard's character affect his relationship with Train? With Norah? Is he a man who wants to connect, but can't?

5. Why does Packard give Train the money that is supposedly for Florida's widow? Why does he make a bet with the fat man that "Mr. Walk here does the right thing" [p. 29]? By giving the money to Sweet, does Train show that he's too innocent for the world he finds himself in?

6. What are the main events in the novel's plot, and is there a clear climax? What kinds of episodes create suspense? Weigh the exploration of character against the narrative passages. Which is more predominant? Does one element seem more important in the novel than the other?

7. All four of the main characters in the novel --- Packard, Norah, Train, and Plural --- are capable of unpredictable outbursts of violence. What is Dexter suggesting about the nature of violent action --- what provokes it, how is it controlled, and when do internal controls break down?

8. Why does Packard befriend Train? Does he do so out of generosity and interest, or with a view to making money from Train's talent? Considering that Packard takes most of the money that they win, is he simply exploiting Train?

9. A major part of **Train** is about the love between Norah and Packard. The novel opens with the words, "At this point in the story, Packard had never fallen in love, and didn't trust what he'd heard of the lingo. . . . It sounded out of control to him, and messy" [p. 1]. What draws them to love each other, and what drives them apart, finally?

10. How is Norah like the women in the crime fiction of writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, and how is she different? Early on, she is presented as a woman who relies on men: "One way or another, men had been trying to protect her or save her all her life. She brought that out in them, even after she had stopped trying" [p. 56]. Does she change throughout the course of the story? How does her final act in the novel relate to this statement?

11. Dexter has chosen Los Angeles, circa 1953, as the setting for his novel. What details make the setting come alive? How does the background of racial tension make itself felt in the setting?

12. The wife of the owner of Paradise Developments, Susan "no capital S" [p. 108], puts together an exhibit of images of

black men she calls "Images from the Working Life" [p. 116] which includes pictures of two men hacking each other to death. How does her sexual exploitation of Train and other black men contribute to the story's insistence on a clear-eyed view of racism? How does her sexual predation relate to Arthur and Sweet's rape of Norah?

**13.** Plural is perhaps the most surprising character in the story. What elements contribute to Plural's charm and strangeness? Is he, too, in certain scenes, a frighteningly unpredictable person? Is he, at least at times, insane?

**14.** Given the breakdown of the relationship between Packard and Norah after Norah becomes pregnant, has Dexter created a situation in which the reader expects a disastrous ending? If so, what elements have gone into making the final scene one that is --- however shocking --- not unexpected? Is it clear what happens to Packard at the end?

**15.** Plural says to Train, "The world is a hungry place, man. . . . And whatever kind of thing you is, there's something out there that likes to eat it. It's natural. That's how the world keeps tidy" [p. 240]. Might this statement be considered a summary of the novel's pessimistic worldview? And if so, is there any hope for survival?

**16.** Dexter has been highly praised as a prose stylist; he is also skilled at giving his characters unique voices. Choose a few passages that exhibit the virtuosity of his writing and discuss what makes them stand out.

**17.** What genre of fiction does this book inhabit? Is it classifiable as a crime novel in the noir style, as a novel about race and racism, or as a psychological thriller, or is it something unique?

## Author Bio

Pete Dexter is the author of the National Book Award winner **Paris Trout** and of **God's Pocket**, **Deadwood**, **Brotherly Love**, and **The Paperboy**. He was born in Michigan and raised in Georgia, Illinois, and eastern South Dakota. He lives on Puget Sound, Washington.

## Critical Praise

"With an exhilarating crime novel that mixes race, sex, murder-and yes, golf-Pete Dexter hits a hole in one."

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