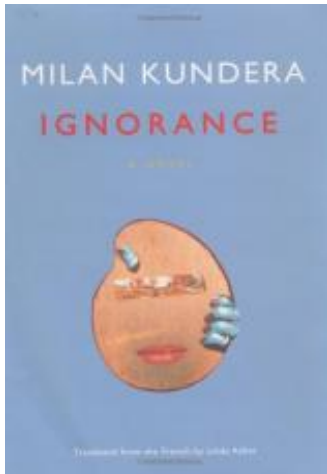


# Ignorance

by Milan Kundera

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## About the Book

The collapse of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe in 1989 put an end not only to an ideology but to a perennial European character, the *Émigré*. After decades of being pitied as the Great Victim or despised as the Great Traitor [p. 30], he (or she) was now free to go back home, perhaps even morally obliged to do so. But what is home? Is it merely a place or something more tenuous and less easily attainable? And can someone who's spent half a life in the grip of nostalgia -- "the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return" [p. 5] -- emerge from it so easily? These are among the questions that Milan Kundera poses in **Ignorance**, a novel whose remarkably brief span encompasses two centuries of European history along with the intertwining relationships of several contemporary Europeans.

Twenty years after leaving their native country, two Czech *émigrés* meet in the Paris airport as they wait for the flight to Prague. Irena is considering returning home for good. Josef, who found asylum in Denmark and married a Danish woman, is only visiting. Irena still keenly remembers the night many years before when she and Josef flirted in a bar in Prague. Josef can't remember Irena's name. Although they are immediately drawn to each other, their attraction -- at least on Irena's part -- is based on a misapprehension, one that will become apparent only at the most awkward and humiliating possible moment.

In the days leading up to their assignation, Kundera tracks his protagonists' movements with the smooth precision of a surveillance camera. We see Irena at a reunion of her old friends; with her bawdy, irrepressibly competitive mother, and with her entrepreneurial Swedish boyfriend, Gustav, who loves the vulgar, tourist-friendly Prague that Irena despises. We follow Josef to a meeting with his long-estranged brother and sister-in-law, a meeting in which tenderness vies with guilt and resentment. And, **Ignorance** being a Kundera novel, we also encounter a series of dazzling meditations on emigration, memory and loss, and particularly on **The Odyssey**, the founding epic of nostalgia, whose hero sacrifices the luxuries of exile for a risky return to a home where he is now a stranger.

## Discussion Guide

1. As in his previous novels, Kundera isn't content to merely tell a story; he also comments on it, via digressions on themes ranging from history to etymology and music. What is the effect of this method? Does it emotionally distance you from the narrative and characters or cause you to see them in a different light? Would you describe **Ignorance** as a realist novel?
2. When her Parisian friend Sylvie urges her to go home to her country, Irena replies "You mean this"--meaning Paris -- "isn't my home anymore?" This exchange suggests that "home" may be a relative phenomenon, that today's home may not be tomorrow's. How is this theme developed elsewhere in **Ignorance**? Can any of Kundera's characters be said to have a true home, or is home in this book always changeable, unreliable, and perhaps even illusory? And is going home a guarantee of happiness?
3. Even as **Ignorance** questions the permanence of home, it also raises doubts about the authenticity of the self, as in this moment when Irena glimpses her reflection in a department store mirror: "The person she saw was not she, it was somebody else, or?it was she but she living a different life." [p. 31] How would you sum up this novel's view of identity? Have Kundera's characters chosen their identities or have their identities been imposed on them by outside forces?
4. Early in the novel Kundera draws a series of correspondences and oppositions: between homesickness, nostalgia, and ignorance; between the longing for a place and the longing for a vanished past or a lost love. How does he develop these themes? Is Irena's nostalgia, for example, merely an expression of ignorance? Conversely, what is the reason for Josef's "nostalgic insufficiency?" [p. 74] When do these characters confuse homesickness with other types of longing, and with what consequences?
5. What is the significance of **Ignorance**'s frequent references to **The Odyssey**? Do any events in this novel parallel those in Homer's epic? Is Josef's devotion to his deceased wife, for example, meant to recall Odysseus's devotion to Penelope? Compare the way Kundera uses **The Odyssey** in this book to the way Joyce uses it in **Ulysses**.
6. "Our century is the only one in which historic dates have taken such a voracious grip on every single person's life." [p.11] In what ways are the characters in **Ignorance** shaped by history and their personal destinies determined by it? Are they ever able to resist history? Does Kundera's view of historical forces hold out any hope for the freedom and dignity of the individual?
7. How would you describe Irena's and Josef's relationships with their families and old friends? Why are these so often marked by suspicion, incomprehension or outright hostility? In contrast, Irena and Josef seem to share a frictionless instant intimacy, even though they are little more than strangers. Is Kundera suggesting that the intimacy of strangers is somehow superior to the stifling, conventional closeness that prevails within most families? Are some of the characters' relationships more genuine than others?

8. What role is played by Irena's friend Milada who, unbeknown to Irena, was once Josef's girlfriend? Does Josef's past treatment of Milada predict his future behavior toward Irena? Is he morally responsible for Milada's mutilation or has Milada merely sacrificed herself for a sentimental fantasy? What do you make of Kundera's use of coincidence? Does he seem to view it the way Irena does -- as an expression of fate?

9. Are you surprised by the sexual encounter between Irena's mother and her boyfriend? Does it strike you as a betrayal of Irena, who at the time is betraying Gustav with Josef? Is Josef himself guilty of betraying Irena by his silence? How would you characterize this novel's attitude toward sex?

## Author Bio

The Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera was born in Brno and has lived in France, his second homeland, since 1975. He is the author of the novels *THE JOKE*, *FAREWELL WALTZ*, *LIFE IS ELSEWHERE*, *THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING*, *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING* and *IMMORTALITY*, and the short-story collection *LAUGHABLE LOVES* --- all originally written in Czech. His most recent novels *SLOWNESS*, *IDENTITY* and *IGNORANCE*, as well as his nonfiction works *THE ART OF THE NOVEL*, *TESTAMENTS BETRAYED*, *THE CURTAIN* and *ENCOUNTER* were originally written in French.

## Critical Praise

"By far his most successful [novel] since *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*."

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