

The Last Banquet

by Jonathan Grimwood



About the Book

Set against the backdrop of the Enlightenment, the delectable decadence of Versailles, and the French Revolution, *THE LAST BANQUET* is an intimate epic that tells the story of one man's quest to know the world through its many and marvelous flavors. Jean-Marie d'Aumout will try anything once, with consequences that are at times mouthwatering and at others fascinatingly macabre (Three Snake Bouillabaisse anyone? Or perhaps some pickled Wolf's Heart?). When he is not obsessively searching for a new taste d'Aumout is a fast friend, a loving husband, a doting father, and an imaginative lover. He befriends Ben Franklin, corresponds with the Marquis de Sade and Voltaire, becomes a favorite at Versailles, thwarts a peasant uprising, improves upon traditional French methods of contraception, plays an instrumental role in the Corsican War of Independence, and constructs France's finest menagerie. But d'Aumout's every adventurous turn is decided by his at times dark obsession to know all the world's flavors before that world changes irreversibly.

As gripping as Patrick Suskind's *PERFUME*, as gloriously ambitious as Daniel Kehlman's *MEASURING THE WORLD*, and as prize-worthy as Andrew Miller's *Pure*, *The Last Banquet* is a hugely appealing novel about food and flavor, about the Age of Reason and the ages of man, and our obsessions and about how, if we manage to survive them, they can bequeath us wisdom and consolation in old age.

Discussion Guide

- 1.The hanging of Dr. Faure's dog recalls the hanging of the villagers in the first chapter. How do the two incidents resemble each other? What major themes do they introduce?
- 2.Jean-Marie "know[s] we're animals," but wonders "if we [aren't] also something more" (199). What makes people "more" than animals? What role does class play?
- 3.There is seemingly no boundary Jean-Marie will not cross in his quest to taste everything at least once. Where do you

draw the line? What is the most exotic thing you've tasted?

4. In a letter to Jean-Marie, the Marquis de Sade claims that sex is 'as important as eating or drinking' (237). Do you agree? How are sex and eating related in the novel?

5. Virginie holds a grudge against Emile for the bet he made with Jerome, and Jean-Marie doesn't defend him. Do you think Emile is treated unfairly because of his class?

6. The sudden death of their son, Jean-Pierre, devastates Virginie and warps her relationship with Jean-Marie. What other factors contribute to her depression? After discovering Virginie's body in the lake, Jean-Marie 'wonder[s] how much of this was [his] fault' (205). Do you think he is partially to blame for her suicide?

7. What does the character of Charlot represent? How do Charlot's feelings for Jean-Marie complicate his status as an aristocrat?

8. How does Jean-Marie's trip to Corsica change him? What distinguishes the Corsican government under Pasquale Paoli from the French government at Versailles?

9. The novel emphasizes the injustice of a hierarchy determined by birth. Jean-Marie believes that Ben Franklin 'is, despite his birth, among nature's natural nobility' (297). What qualities define this 'natural nobility'?

10. Jean-Marie determines to refuse Georges Duras's request to marry Helene after he sees Georges cruelly whipping his horse. Do you think Jean-Marie made the right decision? What is the significance of the endnote about Georges?

11. At the end of the novel, Jean-Marie wonders whether Tigris is in fact 'the greatest of his loves' (326). In what way is Jean-Marie's love for Tigris greater than his love for Virginie or Manon?

Author Bio

Jonathan Grimwood was born in Malta and grew up in the Far East, Britain and Scandinavia. He has written for many newspapers and magazines, including *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Independent*. Writing under the name Jon Courtenay Grimwood, he has won the British Science Fiction Association Award for Best Novel twice, and his work has been published in over fifteen languages. He divides his time between London and Winchester.

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