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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Beautiful Ruins by Jess Walter

Summary

The “beautiful ruins” of this affecting story include not only its physical setting, in a tiny coastal village destined for extinction (Porto Vergogna or the Port of Shame), but also the larger than life characters, including a “real” Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, who appear as supporting actors to the main story of the more ordinary cast: the arrestingly beautiful blonde starlet Dee Moray and the young innkeeper who falls for her, Pasquale Tursi, and many many other memorable characters, their children, their friends, their colleagues.

The novel moves back and forth in time between 1962 and a somewhat vaguely defined “recently.” The juxtaposition made possible by this slippage in time serves to remind the reader that all things beautiful eventually become ruins and that many ruins (conversely) were once things of beauty. That double-focus is the source of much of the book's poignancy. The novel’s many other, mostly youthful comic characters, associated with its second setting in contemporary Hollywood, do help to balance the book’s almost unbearable sadness and lend it a sense of the future that keep it from tipping into tragedy. One character, the “dead-gazed” geriatric Michael Deane, miracle of plastic surgery, tells the haunting cautionary tale of what happens if one rejects the embrace of time.

The result is a beautifully composed, highly entertaining philosophical novel, tightly unified despite its wide-ranging plot.

Discussion Questions

1. One of Jess Walter’s concerns in *Beautiful Ruins* is how real life intersects and influences art. Talk about the numerous ways that idea plays out in the novel.
2. This is a work of social satire, skewering much in American culture. What are the many targets the author turns his satirical eye on? Is his aim accurate, fair, unfair?
3. Much has been made of the novel’s humor? What do you find funny? Hotel Adequate View? Anything else?
4. The book’s opening is reminiscent of a lush, epic romantic film—the beautiful dying Dee Moray steps off the boat and into Pasquale’s heart. Although the book veers off new directions, is it still a love story? What kinds of love are presented in the novel? What, ultimately, does the novel have to say about love?

5. In what ways does Pat Bender resemble his biological father? Are genes destiny? Had you been Dee (or Debra), his mother, would you have told him who his father was?
6. The book's timeline, locales, different voices and unusual text treatments (Hollywood film pitch, biography, unfinished novel, how-to book) are jumbled. Did you find it confusing, hard to follow, irritating? Or was the variety intriguing? What might the author be hoping to achieve by scrambling everything up? How would the book be different if it were told in chronological order with a straightforward narrator?
7. Talk about contrast between the grand Hollywood projects of the past, like Cleopatra, and the reality show that Michael Deane and Claire are producing. What does it say about our current culture or collective imaginative life? Does Jess Walter suggest a solution to what he is criticizing?
8. What did you think, initially, of Shane's Donner Party pitch to Michael Deane? Did you agree with Michael...or laugh with Claire?
9. Michael Deane says his great epiphany was "People want what they want." What does he mean? Do you agree with him? How did that revelation shape his career?
10. In addition to Michael Deane (in Question 9), each character has a powerful revelation in which they see themselves as they truly are and see the nature of life. What are the revelations of the other characters...and how do they shape their lives?
11. What is the significance of the novel's title? (It was first used by a journalist to describe Richard Burton many years after his marriage to Taylor.) Who else, or what, are the "beautiful ruins"?
12. Of the seven main characters, which is your favorite? Least favorite (don't all say Michael Deane)?

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