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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Paris in the Present Tense by Mark Helprin

Summary

Mark Helprin's powerful, rapturous new novel is set in a present-day Paris caught between violent unrest and its well-known, inescapable glories.

Seventy-four-year-old Jules Lacour—a maître at Paris-Sorbonne, cellist, widower, veteran of the war in Algeria, and child of the Holocaust—must find a balance between his strong obligations to the past and the attractions and beauties of life and love in the present.

In the midst of what should be an effulgent time of life—days bright with music, family, rowing on the Seine—Jules is confronted headlong and all at once by a series of challenges to his principles, livelihood, and home, forcing him to grapple with his complex past and find a way forward. He risks fraud to save his terminally ill infant grandson, matches wits with a renegade insurance investigator, is drawn into an act of savage violence, and falls deeply, excitingly in love with a young cellist a third his age. Against the backdrop of an exquisite and knowing vision of Paris and the way it can uniquely shape a life, he forges a denouement that is staggering in its humanity, elegance, and truth.

In the intoxicating beauty of its prose and emotional amplitude of its storytelling, Mark Helprin's *Paris in the Present Tense* is a soaring achievement, a deep, dizzying look at a life through the purifying lenses of art and memory.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Mark Helprin use flashbacks to tell Jules Lacour's story? How does this technique affect your reading of the novel, and of Jules as a character?
2. What role do the city of Paris and its history play in the novel?
3. What did you make of Jules' ultimately unsuccessful experience composing Acorn's "telephone hold music"?
4. How did the violent acts on the Pont de Bir-Hakeim change your understanding of Jules? Was Jules' reaction to the events he stumbled upon justified?

5. How does Jules' Jewish faith and heritage inform his actions and beliefs? How is today's rising wave of religious intolerance framed and portrayed in the novel?
6. What does the Seine — the dangerous channel where Jules has rowed against the current for six decades, and the depths into which he submerges himself following the events on the Pont de Bir-Hakeim — symbolize in the story?
7. Characters like Detectives Arnaud and Duvalier, young Elodi the cellist, the insurance agent Armand Marteau, and Professor Amina Belkacem emerge, disappear, and re-emerge throughout the novel. Why are their stories told in this manner? Whose narrative did you find the most powerful or effecting?
8. How does Jules weigh his loyalties and obligations — to Jacqueline and years past, to his grandson Luc and the promise of his family's future, and to his own present feelings and desires for Elodi and Amina — throughout the novel? How do his past experiences affect the decisions he makes?
9. Jules begins the novel as a 74-year-old man with deeply rooted habits and beliefs. How does he change throughout the course of the novel? What, if anything, prompts these changes?
10. The theme of an older man's infatuation with a youth appears throughout literature. For example, Sir Thomas Wyatt's "They Flee from Me," Cohen and Melissa in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Gustav von Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, to name just a few. How is Jules similar to his predecessors in this regard, as a man close to death who grasps at the incarnation of youth and life, and how does he differ?
11. Despite his experiences with the *Sei Lob und Preis mit Ehren*, Jules calls music "the oxygen that had kept him alive" (392). How can this be true? What does music mean to Jules, and why?
12. The virtues of right-conduct, courage, modesty, self-discipline and self-sacrifice are largely absent from the modern anti-hero, whose job is often to show them as destructive and hypocritical. This book is different. How? Why? And what is your view?
13. In an interview with *Open Letters Monthly*, Helprin calls *Paris in the Present Tense* a novel about, among other themes, "dying well." He says, "knowing how to die well makes it possible to live well." What does it mean to you to "die well"? Does Jules "die well"?
14. The author has stated that the more work you put into a book, the more you get out of it. He has also stated that one of his goals is to draw in, entrance, and transport the reader to the point where, like a dream, at times the book seems more real than reality. These statements may seem contradictory, but are they?
15. Would *Paris in the Present Tense* make a movie you might like to see — visually, emotionally, musically, and in terms of action, suspense, and even humor.