



Atticus

By Ron Hansen
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Plot Summary

She told him, "When I was in college I read a folktale about a father pursuing a son who'd run far away, from one world to the next. The father called to him, 'Please come back!' But his son looked across the great gulf between them and shouted to him, 'I can't go that far!' So his father yelled to his son, 'Then just come back halfway!' But his boy replied, 'I can't go back halfway!' And finally his father shouted, 'Walk back as far as you can! I'll go the rest of the way!'"

- Atticus

Sixty-seven-year-old oilman and rancher Atticus Cody returns home one day before Christmas just in time to see a yellow taxicab heading away from his white two-story house. Yelling "Who's there?" but receiving no reply, he enters to find his forty-year-old son, with sunburnt face and hair bleached platinum by the sun, sitting in his father's green wingback chair. "Merry Christmas," Scott says to his astonished father.

So begins this novel of separation and return, hurt and forgiveness. An alcoholic wanderer and artist, Scott has recently settled into a life of reckless partying and drinking among a group of expatriates and Mexicans living in the town of Resurreccion on the Caribbean coast. It is a parasitic existence, in stark contrast to the lives of his upright father and older brother Frank, a highly regarded state senator with a perfect wife and four children.

Not long after Scott returns to Mexico, Atticus receives a phone call from Renata Isaacs, Scott's former girlfriend, telling him that Scott has committed suicide. Atticus goes down alone to Resurreccion to recover Scott's body. Yet as his journey unfolds, Atticus's memories of and longing for his son become interwoven with his search for answers to why his son died and, ultimately, who his son was. In Resurreccion, Atticus and Scott achieve a reconciliation of abiding love and forgiveness that, as Hansen suggests, is what keeps our world from falling apart.

"The goal of writing is [to be] as clear and beautiful as possible, trying to produce symmetry and harmony out of chaos—like medieval carvers who were trying to imitate what angels would do on earth."

- Ron Hansen

Topics for Discussion

1. On the first page of the novel, Atticus Cody sees the illusory vision of two suns—a sundog. This motif of doubling is one of the ways Hansen structures and unifies *Atticus*. Among the character pairings, in which the doubles are twins or opposites, are Scott-Reinhardt, Scott-Frank, Scott-Atticus, Atticus-Stuart, Atticus-Renaldo, Renata-Serena, and Serena-Carmine. What is the relation between the two characters in each pairing? How do these pairings contribute to the larger themes of the novel? What is symbolically suggested by the motif of doubling, with reference to ideas about identity? Fate?
2. Another instance of doubling in *Atticus* is in the novel's two main settings: Antelope County, Colorado and Resurreccion, Mexico, along the Caribbean coast. How does Mexico function symbolically in relation to North America? Why do so many North Americans and Europeans settle there—what are they seeking? What do they find? What is the draw of Mayan culture and ritual for Scott? What is the impact of the expatriate community upon the locals? How do the Mexicans and expatriates regard one another? What is Mexico's effect on Atticus? What does it mean to return to Colorado after encountering this symbolic Mexico?
3. Hansen has said this is a novel "about forgiveness." The novel's main example of forgiveness is the father who forgives his prodigal son. What are the sins of the son that must be forgiven? Can we distinguish between Scott's sins—between his sins of commission or omission? Sins deliberately done or accidentally? Could you forgive Scott if he were a family member or friend? Are there things for which Atticus requires forgiveness from Scott?
4. A related theme of the novel is the nature of love. Think of Scott's mother's final words, "Oh honey, no," and Atticus's first words to Scott after the accident, "Are you okay?" Although Scott remembers them with shame, his parents' words demonstrate their loving connection to their son, even in the midst of catastrophe. What different kinds of love are portrayed in the novel? What makes some sustaining, while others appear to be primarily destructive? Or is ambivalence inherent in all love?
5. The novel suggests that "The House of He Who Invents Himself" is ultimately an underworld tomb, where homeless, nameless beggars dwell in "loss and impermanence." Why is this? What is Hansen suggesting about the relation of the individual to memory, family, and community? What are the responsibilities beyond self-preservation or self-invention that each of us have? What are the consequences of turning away from these responsibilities?
6. The novel unfolds by showing the ways a settled life—Atticus's in Colorado—can be tilted off balance by a sudden, unexpected event. But by the end of the novel, balance has been restored and Atticus resettles himself in Colorado, where he is eventually rejoined by his son. To achieve this, Hansen uses Scott's monologue (Part Six) and the brief Part Seven to tie up the loose threads of the murder mystery and disclose "the hidden value x that would solve the algebra of this boy" that lie at the center of the book. Do you feel that the conflicts in the novel are resolved too neatly? Do you feel that the happy ending is forced? Unconvincing? Or that the structure of the moral parable underpinning the novel is inadequate to deal with the complexities of contemporary life?
7. The novel focuses on a troubled father-son relationship. Are there clues in the novel as to the origins of this vexed relationship? What are the conditions or problems that seem to have set Atticus and Scott at odds? Are father-son relationships difficult in ways that mother-daughter relationships are not? What do you feel the future might hold for Atticus and Scott?

8. On another level, the father-son relationship alludes to God the Father in relation to humanity. In what ways does the novel develop this overtly religious theme?

About the Author: I believe that it is risk that energizes a writer," says Ron Hansen. "I am challenged when I write from a woman's perspective or set my work in a historical period, because there is so much more that I have to imagine." Hansen has been imaging fictional worlds since his childhood in Nebraska, when stories of old west outlaws helped shape his future writing. In fact his first two novels, *Desperadoes* and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, retell Wild West legends. His other novels are *Mariette in Ecstasy* and *Atticus*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. *Nebraska*, a collection of short stories, received an Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. With fellow novelist Jim Shepard, he edited the anthology *You've Got to Read This: Contemporary American Writers Introduce Stories That Held Them in Awe*. He also wrote the screenplays for *Mariette in Ecstasy* and, more recently, for Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

Hansen graduated from Creighton University in Omaha, and went on to the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop where he studied with John Irving. Having spent many years as an itinerant scholar, he is now Gerard Manley Hopkins, S. J., Professor in Arts and Humanities at Santa Clara University in northern California. Hansen earned a Masters degree in spirituality from Santa Clara in 1995.

His strong personal interest in the connection between religion and literature is the focus of his next book, *A Stay Against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction*, which HarperCollins will publish in January 2001.

A conversation with Ron Hansen about *Hitler's Niece*

When did you first hear the nearly forgotten story of the strange love affair between Hitler and his niece, Geli Raubal?

I was reading *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* by Alan Bullock, and he mentions Geli Raubal several times. I had never heard about her, but was struck by the fact that she was the only woman that Hitler ever loved or wanted to marry. I at first intended to write a short story about her, a story that would consider what it might have been like to be loved by this evil man, one of the monsters of the 20th century. Was she seduced by Hitler, was she an accomplice, or was she in love with him? I started reading other books, mostly reminiscences of people who knew her, and as I got into it I realized that there was so much more than a short story. I had a novel.

What was it about Geli's story that attracted you and inspired you to write a novel?

I've long been fascinated by Hitler's character. How did this monster have such control over people and almost win his war? He was an unprepossessing character with no education—seemingly nothing going for him except his incredible oratory skills. Why was that enough to sway a whole country? I thought that by looking at Hitler through Geli's eyes, from her perspective, we might gain some insights.

What did you feel you, as a novelist, could bring to the story that may have eluded historians and biographers?

Historians are stuck with the facts as they've been presented, and in some ways they are facts that were massaged by the machinery of the Nazi party. And, in the case of Hitler, there are enormous gaps. But if you read between the lines, it all makes perfect sense. And that's what novelists do. I try to take the facts and fill in based on what I've observed about human behavior—to try to figure out what would be the likeliest way for a character to get from one point to the next. That's what I've done with Geli Raubal in *Hitler's Niece*.

And, as a novelist, you needed to get inside Hitler and, sometimes surprisingly, imbue him with human characteristics.

I think the one thing we learn from fiction is that people are never totally good or totally bad. As hard as it is to believe, this has to have been true about Hitler as well. He had that extraordinary ability to dominate and control people, to keep people coming back to him. He had to be more than a selfish bore or people would not have been drawn to him.

Many years after the war, Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, was released from prison and he watched film footage of Hitler for the first time in many years. He said he was struck by how dull Hitler seemed on film, as opposed to how he really was. Hitler must have had qualities that have been lost to history, that we might even label redeeming.

So you think Hitler had a human side?

Human, if not good. But, I believe he was a brilliant actor who could only present himself publicly through these personas. We have no way of knowing how he transmitted this energy, yet the millions of people he seduced could not have all been idiots. He must have been charming. Of course, the idea that Hitler was charming is startling. We think of him as that figure on the podium, spewing vengeance against the Jews.

Back to Geli, who is at the center of the novel. What did you gain by casting the novel from her perspective?

For me, she was the pleasure of the book, because unlike the others in Hitler's circle, she could make wry comments. She treats him with irony, she is not swayed by his politics. She never becomes a Nazi and even holds herself up in opposition to his ideas and gets away with it. She becomes a heroine for these reasons, a stand-in acting the way I hope I could have acted in that situation.

But she doesn't really get away with her ideas? She is killed because of her independence....

True, she is doomed from the very first moment that Hitler falls in love with her. Everyone he ever fell for was doomed, because he didn't know

how to have a love affair. Eva Braun had a terrible life, and was forced to commit suicide. Renata Mueller committed suicide or was pushed out of a window. I think Geli was murdered.

Yes, of the numerous theories explaining Geli's death, you have chosen the one in which Hitler himself killed her. Did you make this choice for the purposes of narrative drama, or do you believe it is the most plausible solution to the mystery?

It seems clear to me that it was not suicide. Everything goes against that, especially the conflicting testimonies of what happened the day of her death. So, once you say it was a homicide, then you're left with only a few people who could have possibly done it. That Hitler would have allowed someone else to kill her and get away with it is preposterous. It's possible to dream up a scheme where one of the others plotted the killing, but they were so afraid of Hitler that they never could have carried it out. That Hitler did it makes the most sense—he was in love with her and needed to control her. And, even if she did commit suicide, it would have been because of Hitler, so it's metaphorically, if not historically correct to put the blame on Hitler.

Geli is simultaneously repulsed and seduced by Hitler's hypnotic hold. Is this duality symbolic of Germany's seduction?

Yes. I was consciously making that connection. You could say it was true about everyone he came in contact with. He was a seducer, and he did what he could to draw people in. Contemporary accounts talk about how Hitler worked on people—he would spend the first hour he met someone just listening, then after an hour he had that person figured out, and then he used that knowledge to manipulate him or her. They would feel that he was a person that understood them completely. They were in his thrall. All these fierce people who headed the Nazi party and caused irreparable damage and homicides by the score, they all confessed that they felt like children around Hitler. He had some sort of talent for mind control. I used Geli to show that in the same way that he imprisoned her in his apartment, he imprisoned people in a psychological way. In some ways Geli was more resistant, but in some ways she was equally susceptible.

On the surface, your novels might seem very different from one another, but are there common themes or concerns that you find yourself returning to in your fiction?

One thing I would say is that almost all my novels are about outlaws, people on the fringe, outside of normal society. People who don't fit in. Nuns in a cloister are women who have removed themselves from society and yet are trying to establish their sense of worth. Jesse James, the Dalton brothers—all these people feel excluded from the conversation, and yet they have the ambition to realize their goals and they do it in their mangled way. Even Atticus, so in control at home in Colorado, is walking on the fringes when he gets to Mexico. And Hitler and Geli, too, were outsiders.

Once again, as with *Mariette in Ecstasy*, you've written a penetrating story of a female point of view. Isn't this unusual for a male writer?

I believe that it is risk that energizes writers. I think writers are in many ways contrarians, we like threats. Writers like to imagine things, so the more imagining we get to do, the happier we are as writers and, we hope, the better our work is. I am challenged when I write from a woman's perspective or set my work in a historical period, because there is so much more that I have to imagine. Concrete details are what make fiction believable, what writers need to create for their readers. If I constantly push myself in creating these details, to try to see things the way other people would have seen them, it makes me a better writer. And that, of course, is better for my readers.