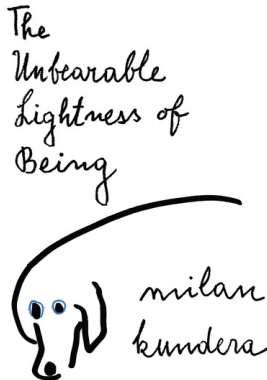


The Unbearable Lightness of Being

By Milan Kundera
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Plot Summary

Tereza and Tomas, Tomas and Sabina, Sabina and Franz, Franz and Marie-Claude--four people, four relationships. Milan Kundera's masterful novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), tells the interlocking stories of these four relationships, with a primary focus on Tomas, a man torn between his love for Tereza, his wife, and his incorrigible "erotic adventures," particularly his long-time affair with the internationally noted painter, Sabina. The world of Kundera's novel is one in which lives are shaped by irrevocable choices and fortuitous events. It is a world in which, because everything occurs only once and then disappears into the past, existence seems to lose its substance and weight. Coping with both the consequences of their own actions and desires and the intruding demands of society and the state, Kundera's characters struggle to construct lives of individual value and lasting meaning.

A novel of ideas, a provocative look at the ways in which history impinges on individual lives, and a meditation on personal identity, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* examines the imperfect possibilities of adult love and the ways in which free choice and necessity shape our lives. "What then shall we choose?" Kundera asks at the beginning of his novel. "Weight or lightness?" This international bestseller is his attempt to answer that question. And the answer is hinted at in the novel's final scene, in which Tomas and Tereza find themselves in a small country hotel after a rare evening of dancing. When Tomas turns on the light in their room, "a large nocturnal butterfly" rises from the bedside lamp and circles the room in which they are alone with their happiness and their sadness.

Discussion Topics

1. What kinds of being carry the attribute of lightness? How is the "lightness of being" of the novel's title presented? In what ways is it "unbearable"? What is the difference between "the sweet lightness of being" that Tomas enjoys in Zurich, after Tereza's return to Prague, and "the unbearable lightness of being"?
2. How does Nietzsche's myth of eternal return, with which Kundera opens his book, function in the novel? What does Kundera mean when he refers to "the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return"? How does what he calls the unbearable burden of eternal return contrast with the "splendid lightness" of our daily lives?
3. How would you describe the three central relationships of the novel--Tereza and Tomas, Tomas and Sabina, Sabina and Franz? How do they embody Kundera's primary concerns and themes?
4. In what ways does Kundera explore what he calls "the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience." In what ways does he show this duality to be fundamental?
5. Both Tereza and Tomas repeatedly think of the series of fortuitous events that brought them together. What is the rule of fortuity, chance, and coincidence in their lives and the lives of others? What does Kundera mean when he writes, "Chance and chance alone has a message for us"?
6. In what ways may Sabina's description of her dual-level paintings--"On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth"--apply to every aspect of the characters' lives and relationships?
7. What meanings and importance do each of the main characters ascribe to fidelity and betrayal? In what instances, for each character, do fidelity and betrayal have either positive or negative qualities?
8. Kundera insists that "the criminal regimes were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise." What visions or versions of paradise are presented in the novel? By whom? How does each vision/version of paradise affect the lives of its enthusiasts and the lives of others?

About the Author

"Kundera has raised the novel of ideas to a new level of dreamlike lyricism and emotional intensity."
--Newsweek

The Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera was born in Brno and has lived in France, his second homeland, for more than twenty years. He is the author of the novels *The Joke*, *Life Is Elsewhere*, *Farewell Waltz*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and *Immortality*, and the short story collection *Laughable Loves*--all originally in Czech. His most recent novels, *Slowness* and *Identity*, as well as his nonfiction works, *The Art of the Novel* and *Testaments Betrayed*, were originally written in French.