



Immortality

By Milan Kundera
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About the Book

Milan Kundera's sixth novel begins with a casual, elegant gesture of a woman to her swimming instructor, a gesture that creates a character -- Agnes -- in the mind of a writer named Kundera. A novel in seven parts, *Immortality* alternates the stories of Agnes, her husband Paul, and her sister Laura with a curious historical footnote, the story of the relationship between Goethe and Bettina von Arnim. The novel portrays Goethe and Ernest Hemingway conversing in the afterlife, and the narrator (named Kundera) carrying on an important philosophical discussion with the clear-eyed Professor Avenarius. Through his characters, Kundera reflects on modern life and Western society and culture, exploring the cult of sentimentality, the difference between the individual self and the individual's public image, the conflict between reality and appearance, the varieties of love and sexual desire, the importance of fame and celebrity, and the all too human longing for immortality. Each of Kundera's characters searches for a way to ensure his survival in the memory of others and, if necessary, at the expense of someone else's immortality. Like Flaubert's *Emma* and Tolstoy's *Anna*, Kundera's Agnes herself becomes an object of fascination, of indefinable longing. From a single gesture springs a

character and a novel, themselves gestures of the imagination that both embody and articulate Kundera's supreme mastery of the novel and its purpose: to thoroughly explore the great themes of existence. **Topics for Discussion**

1. What significance does Kundera ascribe to immortality? Goethe tells Hemingway, "Immortality means eternal trial." In what ways might this be true, not only for such famous artists as Goethe, Hemingway, and Beethoven, but for Agnes, Paul, and each of us? How do Kundera's "minor immortality," "great immortality," and "ridiculous immortality" differ from each other?
2. What roles does death play in the novel? What kinds of death occur, and what is the importance of each? In what ways does death "form an inseparable pair" with immortality?
3. Kundera writes, "Without the faith that our face expresses our self, without that basic illusion, that archillusion, we cannot live, or at least we cannot take life seriously." In what ways do the concept of the individual self and its expression gather importance in the novel? How does a notion of one's self ("mere illusion, ungraspable, indescribable," claims Paul) differ from a notion of one's image in the eyes of others ("the only reality, all too easily graspable and describable")?
4. What is the importance of solitude to Agnes and to other characters? What does it consist of for each? How is solitude related to the longing for immortality? What is the importance of the distinction that Agnes makes between living and being?
5. In the sections dealing with Goethe and Hemingway and those dealing with Agnes, Paul, and Laura, celebrity and fame take on increasing importance. To what extent is immortality a function of celebrity? Has celebrity replaced immortality in the twentieth century? If so, with what consequences?
6. Agnes's and Paul's differing attitudes toward their bodies, we are told, "revealed the difference between the male and female lot in life." What aspects of that difference does Kundera identify? To what extent -- and why -- do you agree or disagree with Kundera's understanding of that difference?
7. What is the "gradual, general, planetary transformation of ideology into imagology" about which Kundera writes in Part Three? What does he mean by "imagology"? How does he see it as characterizing our time? What effects does it have on individuals, politics, the arts, and society in general?
8. Do you agree or disagree -- and why -- with what appears to be Kundera's final judgment, prompted by the allegory of Goethe and Beethoven at Teplitz, that "those who create... deserve more respect than those who rule ... that creativity means more than power, art more than politics; that works of art, not wars or aristocratic costume balls, are immortal"? How is this judgment illustrated or represented in the novel?
9. To what extent do the characters' anxieties result from their being expatriates (Agnes from Switzerland and Kundera from Czechoslovakia, for example)? How do they deal with being expatriates? To what extent may Kundera be saying that everyone in the twentieth century is an expatriate? From where or what?
10. In Part Three, Kundera writes, "There are two methods for cultivating the uniqueness of the self in a world in which it is increasingly difficult "for an individual to reinforce the originality of the self." What are those two methods; with which characters are they associated; and how are they demonstrated or illustrated? What are the risks and rewards of each?
11. How do Agnes, Avenarius, Paul, Laura, and others respond to the question posed in Part Five: "How to live in a world with which you disagree"? How would you respond to that question?
12. In what he calls "this short history" of the gesture that Agnes adopted from her father's secretary and Laura adopted from Agnes, Kundera claims that "we can recognize the mechanism determining the relationship of the two sisters..." What is that mechanism, and how is it determined by gesture? How are other relational mechanisms -- that between Goethe and Bettina, for example -- revealed or determined by gestures?

About the Author: The Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, 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 written 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.