



## Soul Mountain

By Gao Xingjian  
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Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature

**Introduction** A man is diagnosed with lung cancer -- precisely the same cancer that had proved deadly to his father not long before -- and then is surprised to discover in a follow-up visit to the doctor that he is in fact perfectly healthy. And, the good news is not delivered with the amount of sensitivity that a new lease on life would seem to merit -- describing the attending doctor, the book reads, "Go and live properly, young man.' He swiveled his chair around, dismissing me." So begins Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*. It is from this peculiar and clear-eyed position that a journey begins through the remote mountains of China. The narrator explores rural villages and reflects on the influence that the Cultural Revolution has had on the people and the land, and reveals a rich inner life and a poignant search of meaning and a sense of purpose. The text begins in the second person, telling what it is that You do. Then it quickly switches to being told in the first person. Later there is a She and a He, both of whom take control of the tale for their parts. And while there is a clear connection between these narrative voices, each one also has his own story, his own feelings, and his own reasons for being on

the trip. There is inevitably a certain comfort that the reader acquires with regard to the changing voices -- for, as with any set of characters, we expect different things from each one. Their issues cross over and their narratives correlate -- perhaps only vaguely at times, or even indiscernibly on occasion -- but always powerfully with regard to their genuine sense of yearning. *Soul Mountain* is an incredible epic that benefits from an author capable of describing the sound of a river at night with a great sense of poetry. And yet, he also has a precision in his writing that is almost icy in the way it captures both beauty and ugliness in people and in the world. A complicated and heartfelt novel that is rich in poetry and history, it displays an unabashed desire to find meaning in the accidents of politics, the progression of history, and all of the surprising effects of life. **Discussion Questions**

1. How many protagonists are there in this book? In what ways can I, You, He, and She be linked?
2. Xingjian's writing seems often to be used as a tool for uncovering history -- for discovering past events that have been obscured by political forces such as the Cultural Revolution, or even just the general decay of nature, as with metal tiles rusting off of a roof. Would you say that the preservation of the past through art is a driving motivation of the book? If so, why does it matter? And if not, then what is the preoccupation with stories of the past, both ancient and recent?
3. What is *Soul Mountain*? Is it ever reached, or would that be too literal a translation of something deeply metaphorical?
4. Nods to existentialism abound in *Soul Mountain*, from the references to nausea, to the general preoccupation with death, decay, and the cruelty often found in human nature. How does existentialism inform your understanding of the book?
5. How is the protagonist changed by his brush with death? He says at one point, "How should I change this life for which I had just won a reprieve?" -- but why do you suppose he responded to a near-death experience in this way?
6. Many of the stories are about women being commodified and abused, raped, killed, or driven to suicide. Further, the She character is one that often feels unsafe, uncertain of her sexuality, and distrustful of You. Did you ever feel that the book was sexist? What point do you think was being made, or is it unfair to ask so general a question about such a vast array of stories and situations?
7. There are so many stories, histories, fables, and myths scattered throughout the book it would be impossible to even keep track of them all as one reads. What do you think is being sought within all of the stories? Why does the first-person narrator look through the rubble of so many ancient Chinese cities, and why does She ask You to constantly tell her more stories?
8. What can you discern about the author's feelings towards modern China from this book?

**About the Author:** Gao Xingjian (whose name is pronounced gow shing-jen) is the first Chinese recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Born in 1940 in Jiangxi province in eastern China, he studied in state schools, earned a university degree in French in Beijing, and embarked on a life of letters. Choosing exile in 1987, he settled in Paris, where he completed *Soul Mountain* two years later. In 1992 he was named a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. He is a playwright and painter as well as a fiction writer and critic.