



The Hidden

By Tobias Hill
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Introduction

In 2004, in Sparta, southern Greece, a close-knit group searches for the buried traces of a formidable ancient power. A latecomer, Ben Mercer finds himself drawn to the charisma of the group's members to the double-edged friendship of his countryman, Jason, the unsettling beauty of the women, Natsuko and Eleschen, and the menace of Max and Eberhard, who idealize the extremes of the ancient Spartans. An archaeology student running from his life at home, Ben is eager to join the excavation project no matter what the cost. But there is more to the group than he understands, and Ben finds out too late that some things should remain hidden.

Interweaving scenes of ancient Sparta with present-day events in a fascinating study of group dynamics, Tobias Hill cuts to the heart of the games people play to stay in control. Written with astonishing grace and power, *The Hidden* is a novel about secrets and the true cost of fulfilling one's

desires.

Questions for Discussion

1. Ben Mercer departs England "With almost no ambition beyond leaving. It had hardly mattered where he went, only that he put some time and space between himself and the life he had damaged beyond repair." In chapter nine we discover that Ben is in fact guilty of marital rape. Knowing this as a reader, is it still possible to sympathise with Ben in his current predicament? As the novel progresses, does Ben become in any way a hero? Do you think the protagonist of a novel should be likeable?
2. Cut off from his wife and child, Ben needs "To be with someone; to be a part of something. He was not a man who was happy alone." In Sparta, this trait manifests in Ben's desire to be part of Eberhard's close-knit group of friends. Later, when Ben discovers the group's true motivations, he still finds it almost impossible to drag himself away from them. Is Ben's neediness his tragic flaw? Is his attachment to the group simply emotional, or does he believe in what they are doing? Does Eberhard take advantage of Ben's weakness? Is Ben brainwashed?
3. In *The Hidden*, Sparta is both a setting and an enduring allusion to terror. In his notebooks, Ben writes that "All extremisms are alike and in Sparta all are prefigured." Do you agree? In what ways does Classical Sparta prefigure the extreme Left-wing and Right-wing movements of recent centuries? What are the attractions of Spartan extremism for Eberhard and his friends?
4. In Ben's transcript of his lecture, Eberhard says that a monster is "A supernatural portent . . . a warning-in-flesh . . . a jealous demonstration of fate." What are the warnings Ben receives of the events ahead of him? Who or what are the real monsters in *The Hidden*?
5. *The Hidden* is unusually paced. It begins at a creep, but gradually gains velocity until, in the concluding chapters, events are happening almost too quickly for Ben to understand. What effect does this have, and why do you think the author chose to do this?
6. To what does the title of *The Hidden* refer? Is there an ambiguity in its reference, and if so, to what might it ultimately apply?

About the Author

Tobias Hill is the critically-acclaimed author of numerous collections of poetry and short stories, as well as four novels. His collection of short stories, *Skin* (1997), won the PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award, and he has twice been shortlisted for the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. He has also worked as rock critic for the Sunday Telegraph and as the poetry editor of the Richmond Review. Hill is currently the Royal Society of Literature Fellow at Sussex University and lives in London.