



Beatrice and Virgil

A Novel

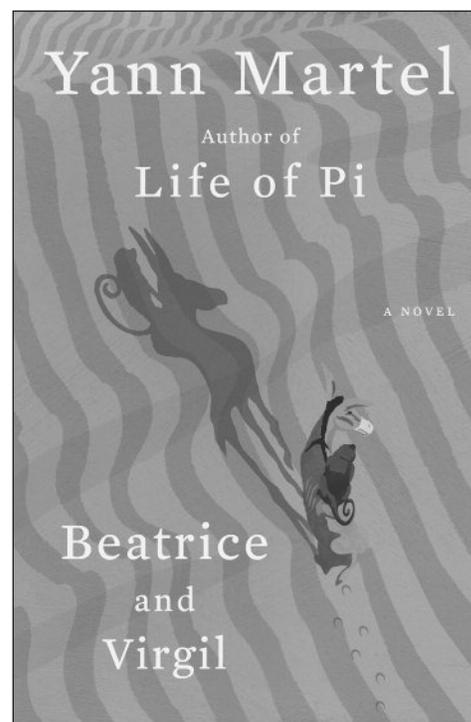
By Yann Martel

Spiegel & Grau | HC | 978-1-4000-6926-2 | 224pp. | \$24.00

Reading Level: 9th Grade

Also Available in Unabridged Audio CD and eBook

Website: www.beatrice-and-virgil.com/



“This novel just might be a masterpiece about the Holocaust....[S]omewhat Martel brilliantly guides the reader from the too-sunny beginning into the terrifying darkness of the old man's shop and Europe's past. Everything comes into focus by the end, leaving the reader startled, astonished and moved.”

—USA Today

• note to teachers •

The overwhelming success and popularity of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*—a unique, philosophical meditation told through the story of a boy stranded in a boat with a tiger—has made for profound anticipation of Martel's follow-up. Media outlets have buzzed and speculated about the next effort, calling it an allegory of the Holocaust. While this is true, *Beatrice and Virgil* is also an exploration of the way that language both limits us and can help us understand our deepest tragedies.

While the book's mysterious premise—a writer receives a note from one of his readers asking for his help—forms a current that pulls readers along, the tale also calls for readers to look deeper, posing significant and timely questions such as: How do we give voice to historical memories? How do we remember? What is the role of art and literature in preserving history and initiating philosophical and ethical dialogue? How can our responsibility as human beings be defined? What does it mean to be complicit? The book also poses questions about the relationship between truth and fiction, asking us to consider and re-evaluate our very means of communication. And it demands that the reader be an active participant in its inquiry.

Although the book challenges readers with such difficult and complex moral questions, its unconventional choice of characters—a donkey and howler monkey, a writer, a strange taxidermist—its curious plot and its aesthetic will captivate readers and keep them engrossed.

This guide provides suggested topics for discussions, terms for consideration, supplemental reading, and activities to engage students. Because *Beatrice and Virgil* illuminates the truth that there is more than one way of seeing and more than one way of communicating, students should be encouraged to ask their own questions and come to their own conclusions.

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• about the author

YANN MARTEL was born in Salamanca, Spain, on June 25, 1963. He lived in Costa Rica, Spain, Canada, France, and Mexico as a young man, and continued to travel extensively as an adult. After completing his studies in philosophy at Trent University in Ontario, he spent over a year in India visiting temples, mosques, churches, and zoos. His first work of fiction, a collection of stories entitled *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, published in 1993, was awarded the Journey Prize. This collection was followed by Martel's first novel, *Self*, a semi-autobiographical work of fiction. In 2001, his second novel, *Life of Pi*, was published to widespread acclaim. It was shortlisted for the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award and the 2001 Governor General's Award for fiction and won the 2001 Hugh MacLennan Prize for fiction. In 2002, the author was awarded the Man Booker Prize. He became the writer-in-residence at the public library of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in 2003, and in 2005, Martel became the University of Saskatchewan's scholar-in-residence. In 2009, he published *What Is Stephen Harper Reading?*, a provocative collection of correspondence and literary recommendations that had originally been directed to Canada's prime minister over the course of two years, highlighting the cultural significance of reading.

• teaching ideas

The extraordinary style and broad thematic content of *Beatrice and Virgil* make it excellent for a variety of classroom subjects. Those teachers using the book in **literature** classes might compare it to other works that center on historical events and social justice or injustice. Its employment of animals as characters would also serve as an excellent topic of study. The book might be paired with George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the works of Franz Kafka, or even *Aesop's Fables*. Students might consider how the use of animals changes our perception of the characters and how it impacts our understanding of the themes treated in the novel. Consider Martel's own thoughts on the subject, which he reveals via his protagonist, Henry. The novel also provides an excellent example of post-modern meta-fiction. Discuss what the story-within-a-story approach might accomplish and how it broadens our experience as readers. The opening of the book gives readers an interesting take on the relationship between fiction and non-fiction. What separates the two genres and how are they defined and delineated? What role does marketing play in this process? What do the two genres share in common?

In **history** classes, one might consider the book's approach to dialogue about the Holocaust and genocide more generally. Consider how it represents the event. How does the book inform us and how does it alter our understanding of a historical event of such tremendous magnitude? How does its characterization as fiction shift or maintain our perception of the subject?

The complex nature of characters such as Henry the taxidermist, Beatrice and Virgil, and even Henry's pets provides a valuable place to begin discussions about character, evil, morality, and identity for those studying **psychology**. **Philosophy and ethics** professors might wish to study Martel's complex ideas about fate, free will, existentialism, morality, ethics, or truth. Study of Henry the taxidermist will be particularly useful here, particularly his notes on taxidermy, which engage readers in a deep dialogue about responsibility and complicity.

• discussion and writing

- 1 When readers first encounter Beatrice and Virgil, Virgil is trying to describe a pear to Beatrice. Is Virgil able to describe it fully? Why or why not? What significance might this passage have when considered alongside the themes and subject of the novel? What does it tell us about language and perspective? How does the passage function symbolically, and what does it tell us about the use of symbolism in literature or art as a tool to communicate about reality?
- 2 Henry claims that his book is about “the ways in which [the Holocaust] was represented in stories.” He claims that depictions of war are very different from depictions of the Holocaust. Do you agree with him? How do depictions of war and the Holocaust generally differ? Why might this be so?
- 3 When Henry is at lunch with his editors, why do they suggest that his book won’t succeed? What is it that Henry hopes to accomplish by pairing fiction with a non-fiction essay? Why does he want to make the book a flipbook? What does the concept of the flipbook tell us about the relationship between fiction and non-fiction?
- 4 When Henry talks about the concept of a flipbook as an animation of a series of individual drawings, why does he say that his flipbook would be of a man confidently walking and then stumbling? What does this image symbolize and how does it tie in with the themes of the novel?
- 5 Why might the author have chosen to employ animals as characters? How do we respond to these characters? How might we respond differently to them if they were human characters?
- 6 Martel chooses to name two of the characters Henry. Why would Martel give two characters the same name? How does the use of the same name function in the novel?
- 7 Discuss the taxidermist’s assertion that “taxidermy does not create a demand; it preserves a result.” Do you believe this is true?
- 8 How does taxidermy serve as a symbolic device within the novel? How does it become representative of the nature of historical interpretation? Can you relate taxidermy to the act of writing? What does Henry say is “the worst enemy of taxidermy” and why did he become a taxidermist?
- 9 What role does the absurd play in the novel? Does the employment or reference to the absurd tell us something about the nature of language and our human limitations? Explain.
- 10 Why is the taxidermist’s play set on a man’s shirt rather than in a country? Is his choice simply a representation of his illogical nature, or is there some significance behind the choice of setting?
- 11 What is an allegory? How does Martel’s novel function as such? How can we come to categorize it as such?
- 12 Why might Martel have chosen to have Henry name the donkey and the monkey Beatrice and Virgil? What are the origins of their names?
- 13 What is the significance of the fate of Henry’s own pets? How does this relate to the themes of the novel? What questions does it pose about nature, identity, good and evil?
- 14 Discuss reactions to the conclusion of the book. How do students feel about the fate of Beatrice and Virgil and the “Games for Gustav”? What purpose might the “Games for Gustav” serve? How does the story’s conclusion change the way students perceive the taxidermist’s character?

• beyond the book: suggested activities

- 1 Consider various works about the Holocaust, or about another major event in world history. This could be a painting, a piece of music, a film or a work of literature, for instance. Analyze how the artist has represented the event. What do we take away from the work? Does it change our view of the historical event or the way in which we perceive and understand it?
- 2 Examine some examples of allegory such as Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave." Discuss the purpose and function of allegory. Have students write their own allegory.
- 3 Choose a single object and ask students to prepare a short, one-page description of the object. Compare the descriptions. What are the similarities and what are the differences? Now read the exchange in which Virgil attempts to describe a pear to Beatrice and the passage in which Henry attempts to describe Virgil as Beatrice would. What do the exercise and the passages reveal about the way we communicate? And the variety of interpretation? About the limitations or power of language?

Next, invite pairs of students to come to the front of the class while the rest of the class observes. Choose several ordinary objects and, with one student blindfolded or with their back to their partner, have the other describe one of the objects without naming it. The blindfolded partner should be able to guess what is being described. How successful is each team? Continue discussions about the variety of interpretation and the way that we describe and communicate. Discuss what may have led to the success of certain teams.

• topics for further discussion

Allegory
Complicity
Deception
Genocide
Historical representation
Holocaust
Identity
Love
Morality
Roles of art and literature, The
Truth

• works by yann martel

Seven Stories (1993)

The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios (1993)

Self (1996)

Life of Pi (2001)

• other titles of interest

The following list contains suggested works that can be studied alongside *Beatrice and Virgil*. Included are works that influenced the author, works that share similarities in formal characteristics such as genre or theme, as well as some works that share a similar historical and cultural significance.

Aesop's Fables

The Diary of Anne Frank

Time's Arrow
Martin Amis

See Under: Love
David Grossman

Waiting for Godot
Samuel Beckett

The works of Franz Kafka

*Songs of Innocence
and Songs of Experience*
William Blake

If This Is a Man and other works
Primo Levi

The Plague
Albert Camus

Animal Farm
George Orwell

Divine Comedy
Dante

Maus
Art Spiegelman

Three Tales
Gustave Flaubert

Night
Elie Wiesel

There are many works of art, pieces of music, and films (for instance: Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* or the films *Schindler's List* and *Life Is Beautiful*) that could also be used in conjunction with an examination of Martel's *Beatrice and Virgil*. Secondary sources need not be limited to literature.

• online resources

<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/about/> : The website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, a living memorial providing materials for education and research.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/> : The website for PBS's documentary *America and the Holocaust* from the *American Experience* series with timeline, maps, and teaching guide.

<http://www.annefrank.com/> : The website of The Anne Frank Center USA.

• about this guide's writer

This guide was produced by JENNIFER BANACH, a writer from Connecticut. Banach has written on a wide range of topics from Romanticism to contemporary literature for publishers including Random House, EBSCO, and Oxford University Press. She served as the Contributing Editor for *Bloom's Guides: The Glass Menagerie* and *Bloom's Guides: Heart of Darkness*, edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc. and is the author of *How to Write about Tennessee Williams*. Currently, Banach is at work on *How to Write about Arthur Miller* and *How to Write about Kurt Vonnegut*, also edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc., and *Understanding Norman Mailer* for the University of South Carolina Press.

• other available guides

We have developed teacher's guides to help educators by providing questions that explore reading themes, test reading skills and evaluate reading comprehension. These guides have been written by teachers like you and other experts in the fields of writing and education. Each book is appropriate for high school readers. Reading ability, subject matter and interest level have been considered in each teacher's guide.

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Fiction:

Achebe, Chinua. **Things Fall Apart**
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. **Purple Hibiscus**
Asimov, Isaac. **I, Robot**
Bradbury, Ray. **Fahrenheit 451**
Brooks, Terry. **The Shannara Trilogy**
Butler, William. **The Butterfly Revolution**
Cather, Willa. **My Antonia**
Cisneros, Sandra. **The House on Mango Street**
Clark, William van Tilburg. **The Ox-Bow Incident**
Clarke, Arthur C. **Childhood's End**
Clinch, Jon. **Finn: A Novel**
Cook, Karin. **What Girls Learn**
Crichton, Michael. **Jurassic Park**
Doctorow, E.L. **Ragtime**
Drew, Alan. **Gardens of Water**
Dunn, Mark. **Ella Minnow Pea**
Ellis, Ella Throp. **Swimming with the Whales**
Ellison, Ralph. **Invisible Man**
Ford, Jamie. **Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet**
Gaines, Ernest. **A Lesson Before Dying**
García Márquez, Gabriel. **Chronicle of a Death Foretold**
Gibbons, Kaye. **Ellen Foster**
Grisham, John. **A Time to Kill**
Guterson, David. **Snow Falling on Cedars**
Hansberry, Lorraine. **A Raisin in the Sun**
Hayes, Daniel. **Eye of the Beholder**
Hayes, Daniel. **The Trouble with Lemons**
Homer. Fitzgerald, Robert, trans. **The Odyssey**
Jones, Lloyd. **Mister Pip**
Kafka, Franz. **The Trial**
Khedairi, Betool. **Absent**
Koontz, Dean. **Odd Thomas**
L'Amour, Louis. **Hondo**
Le Guin, Ursula K. **A Wizard of Earthsea**
Matar, Hisham. **In the Country of Men**
Maxwell, William. **So Long, See You Tomorrow**
McCarthy, Cormac. **All The Pretty Horses**
McCarthy, Susan Carol. **Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands**

Miéville, China. **Un Lun Dun**
Mitchell, David. **Black Swan Green**
Mori, Kyoko. **Shizuko's Daughter**
Mullen, Thomas. **The Last Town on Earth**
Naylor, Gloria. **Mama Day**
Otsuka, Julie. **When the Emperor Was Divine**
Potok, Chaim. **The Chosen**
Pullman, Philip. **The Amber Spyglass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Golden Compass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Subtle Knife**
Rawles, Nancy. **My Jim**
Remarque, Erich Maria. **All Quiet on the Western Front**
Richter, Conrad. **The Light in the Forest**
See, Lisa. **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan**
Shaara, Jeff. **Gods and Generals**
Shaara, Jeff. **The Last Full Measure**
Shaara, Michael. **The Killer Angels**
Shaffer, Mary Ann; Barrows, Annie. **The Guernsey Literary & Potato Peel Pie Society**
Shute, Neil. **On the Beach**
Sinclair, Upton. **The Jungle**
Smith, Alexander McCall. **The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency**
Sparks, Christine. **The Elephant Man**
Spiegelman, Art. **Maus I**
Tan, Amy. **The Joy Luck Club**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **Lord of the Rings Trilogy**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **The Hobbit**
Twain, Mark. **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Dacey's Song**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Homecoming**
Vonnegut, Kurt. **Cat's Cradle**
Vonnegut, Kurt. **Slaughterhouse-Five**
Wartski, Maureen. **Candle in the Wind**
Wolff, Tobias. **Old School**

Nonfiction:

Angelou, Maya. **I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**
Armstrong, Karen. **Islam**
Baldwin, James. **Nobody Knows My Name**
Baldwin, James. **The Fire Next Time**
Bible. **The Five Books of Moses**
Brokaw, Tom. **Boom**
Bryson, Bill. **Short History of Nearly Everything**
Cary, Lorene. **Black Ice**
Chen, Da. **Colors of the Mountain**
Collins, Billy. **Poetry 180/180 More**
Conway, Jill Ker. **The Road from Coorain**
Dumas, Firoozeh. **Funny in Farsi**
Farrow, Anne, et. al. **Complicity**
Frank, Anne. **Diary of a Young Girl**
Grisham, John. **A Time to Kill**
Haley, Alex. **The Autobiography of Malcolm X**
Hari, Daoud. **The Translator: A Memoir**
Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. **Made to Stick**
Hickam, Homer. **October Sky**
Hunter, Latoya. **The Diary of Latoya Hunter**
Hunter-Gault, Charlayne. **In My Place**
Katz, Jon. **Geeks**
Kennedy, Randall. **Nigger**
Kidder, Tracy. **Mountains Beyond Mountains**
Kidder, Tracy. **Strength in What Remains**
LaNier, Carlotta Walls. **A Mighty Long Way**
Lewis, Anthony. **Gideon's Trumpet**
Miller, Jennifer. **Inheriting the Holy Land**
Nafisi, Azar. **Reading Lolita in Tehran**
Nazario, Sonia. **Enrique's Journey**
Neufeld, Josh. **A.D.**
Opdyke, Irene Gut. **In My Hands**
Pollan, Michael. **The Botany of Desire**
Robison, John Elder. **Look Me in the Eye**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **Almost a Woman**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **When I Was Puerto Rican**
St. John, Warren. **Outcasts United**
Suskind, Ron. **A Hope in the Unseen**
Taylor, Nick. **American-Made**
Thomas, Piri. **Down These Mean Streets**
Tram, Dang Thuy. **Last Night I Dreamed of Peace**
Tye, Larry. **Satchel**
Whiteley, Opal. **Opal: The Journey of an Understanding Heart**



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