

# **The Book of Laughter and Forgetting Study Guide**

**The Book of Laughter and Forgetting by Milan  
Kundera**

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# Plot Summary

Throughout the novel, the theme of laughter, memories and the past are explored in a variety of vignettes that cover these themes in different manners. Through the main character Tamina and the other sub-characters, these concepts are analyzed and interpreted through the character's actions, thoughts and impulses.

The novel begins with a man named Clementis leaving his fur hat on a political colleague's head, which later becomes the only symbol that he ever existed. With this idea in mind, the novel continues to analyze how the past impacts the current lives of many of his characters. For Marketa and Jan, for example, their love relationship is established in the first few weeks of knowing one another. He is a woman chaser and she is the martyr, making him feel guilty for his action. It is because of this foundation that Eva can suggest Marketa come visit her and her husband without fear of reproach from Jan because the foundation of their relationship has been established that Marketa will always have the suspicions and Jan will not. Therefore, Marketa can have an affair without worry that Jan will suspect a thing. When Jan becomes older, he will define his relationships with women by a border, which is defined by the number of times he has repeated a specific act.

Tamina lives in the past and through the memories of her late husband throughout the novel. She becomes like the country of Czech in that both she and the country start to lose their memories and in doing so, lose their definitions, identity and contours. Tamina works to restore her life by gaining control over lost love letters and notebooks, but when this fails, she gives up. In the same way, the country of Czech with its fluid, elusive memories is a country whose people do not have a single collective memory together and for this reason, do not have a strong sense of national identity.

Laughter and acceptance or mockery is another important theme. Laughter is either a rejoicing tribute to something that has happened or an inappropriate tool of the devil (such as in Passer's funeral). When individuals come together to celebrate and sing, laughing with each other in a ring dance, their inclusivity makes them one unit, floating towards the sky and towards the angels. However, outside the ring dance the individual can fall and fall victim to the devilish laughter of inappropriateness.

Tamina may be the main focal point of the novel, but the other characters work to provide a solid counterpoint to her actions. The student, for example, demonstrates the principle of *litost* that Tamina also exhibits in her life. Meanwhile, the lost letters of Mirek provide a good contrast to her own life's search for the letters from her husband—albeit from a wholly different viewpoint. Finally, the relationships of Jan and Edwige or Karel and Marketa can be compared to the relationship of Tamina and her husband. In this way, although Tamina is the least active person in the story, she is the character from which the other stories ultimately revolve.

Through a range of characters, Kundera analyzes each of these themes and ties each group together by their common interaction between laughter, memories, forgetting,



history, the past and social acceptance. In this way, Kundera achieves that which Beethoven and Kundera's father spent their last years working on—an understanding on the variation of a theme. In Kundera's case, he delves into the importance of laughter and the past through his characters actions, feelings and more.



# Part I: Lost Letters

## Part I: Lost Letters Summary

In February 1948, Klement Gottwald steps out onto a balcony to address the Czech people below. Because his head is bare and it is cold outside, his associate Clementis gives him his fur hat. Years later, Clementis will be considered a traitor to the country and erased from its collective memory, but his hat will stay on Gottwald's head in the pictures forever. Flash forward to 1971 and a man named Mirek is driving to see Zdena, a woman that he had an affair with 25 years ago. He is being followed since he is now considered an enemy of the state, a fact he is very aware of, but still persistently drives to meet this woman on the pretense that he wants his old love letters back from her.

During his drive, Mirek stops at a auto repair shop, but the woman in charge of letting him in sniffs impolitely at him because he is famous and everybody knows the government is after him. Regardless, he finally gets in to have his car checked and then continues on his way.

The knowledge of our collective past is easily replaced and forgotten, as Kundera the author remembers a number of historical events that happened in Bohemia and the Czech Republic. In this frame of reference, Mirek continues driving towards Zdena, even though he was relieved and felt free when they broke up. Good things happened to him as soon as they broke up, yet he is in love with his destiny and his march towards his ruin seems beautiful to him at the time. Mirek has always been ashamed of Zdena for the simple fact that she is ugly. He lies to other mistresses and friends that she was older than he was, that he was entranced by her political connections and this is why he fell in love with her—although neither of these statements are correct. The reason he was with an ugly woman at the time is because he did not yet have the confidence to approach the pretty ones.

He pulls up to Zdena's apartment and talks with her. She urges him to make a deal with his political party, to save himself, which Mirek does not trust. He thinks she is setting a trap for him and instead asks for his love letters, the supposed impetus behind his traveling to her home. She wants to know why he wants these letters again and he says he only wants to borrow them. He hates the idea that she holds that piece of his life in her possession, although he does not say this to her. She tells him that she will never give him the letters, ever.

With that, Mirek leaves, temporarily losing the men following him in the car. While reveling in the temporary freedom, Mirek contemplates that he wanted to erase the memory of Zdena forever from his mind. He drives up to his house and finds the men that usually follow him waiting for him outside the front door, patiently. As he walks in, his home is being searched by police and Mirek's 17-year-old son stands there forlorn, telling his father they arrived shortly after Mirek left to find Zdena's house. The letters that Mirek kept between colleagues and friends have been found by the police and will



be used against them. Ultimately, Mirek will be sentenced to six years, his son will get two years and ten of his friends will go to prison for one to six years apiece.

## Part I: Lost Letters Analysis

The concept of lost letters and their connection to a person's past is an important theme to the novel, as well as a strong foreshadowing of what is to transpire between Tamina and other characters in the novel. This trip for Mirek is a small microcosm of the larger pursuit that the main character Tamina will undertake in future chapters.

Despite hundreds of thousands of lives being influenced and changed, the history of the world is easily forgotten. Kundera writes, "There is not a single historic even we can count on being commonly known" and with this sentiment, the foundation of the novel is set. Our history loses its significance and importance as Time erases it from our memories. The only thing that keeps history alive are the letters and pictures we keep. With this in mind, the fur hat of Clementis is a rebellious item that clings to reminding everyone that Clementis once existed, not allowing his existence to be erased through letters and pictures. His fur hat signals that he was once there and was once considered an important figure.

Mirek drives to Zdena's home because he wants his old love letters back from her so that she will forget him. He wants to have her erased from his memory and have her erase him from her memory, but she will not allow him the prerogative of an author, to have this power over their lives. She wants to stay in control. With his letters, she can acutely remember their relationship and what he was like at that point in his history. Mirek wants her to give this piece of his life back because in her possession, it is out of his control. Interestingly, when he returns to his home, it is the other letters that he keeps from his friends and colleagues that will condemn them. Mirek does not responsibly handle the correspondence of his friends and colleagues, yet demands letters from an ex-lover he knew 25 years ago. The importance of letters and their connection and control over the collective history cannot be underestimated.



## Part II: Mama

### Part II: Mama Summary

Marketa used to dislike her mother-in-law strongly when she and her husband Karel lived with Karel's parents. When Karel and Marketa finally move out, they tell each other they want to live "as far away from Mama as possible." When Karel's father dies, Marketa starts to write letters to Karel's mother out of sympathy and because the distance and time away from her softens Marketa's perspective on her mother-in-law. One Easter weekend, while their 10-year-old son is away, Marketa invites Karel's mother to come spend the weekend with them, but requests she leave on Sunday morning because Eva is coming to visit. The mother-in-law refuses to leave until Monday afternoon. This rebellion upsets Marketa, but she is not strong enough to tell her to go home on the original date.

Eva arrives and Marketa asks her to pretend she is Marketa's cousin. Years before, Eva met Marketa in a sauna and they were instantly friends. Marketa introduces Eva to Karel and they start a unique relationship where the three of them frequently sleep together. Marketa is not threatened by Eva because Eva is not looking for a relationship, only male attention and satisfaction. Unbeknownst to Marketa, Eva and Karel met earlier and contrived a plan to have Eva and Marketa meet separately so Marketa would believe she initiated and therefore controlled the relationship between Eva and Karel.

While Mama is there with the three of them, she remembers a political poem that she once recited. However, when she recites it to them, she forgets the last line and misplaces what period in her life she recited that poem. When Karel corrects her, she is extremely embarrassed and doubts herself and her memories. Mama will eventually recollect her version of the full poem and come back out into the main area that evening to recite it.

During the time that she is in her bedroom, upset and worried that she cannot recall the whole poem, Karel, Eva and Marketa are drinking. Karel receives a phone call from another mistress and Marketa becomes enraged that he is setting up a meeting with someone else. They both become highly upset and Eva is the one, ironically, who reconciles them in order to save the evening and her visit with them. After things are rectified, Eva walks into the main room in nothing more than a scanty t-shirt, running into Mama who is talking to Karel. Embarrassed but trapped, she sits down as if nothing is amiss. Marketa nearly walks into the room in little more than a sash, but quickly sees Mama in the room and returns in a robe. Mama points out to Karel that Eva looks like a former friend of hers and later that evening during their threesome, Karel will picture Eva as that woman to become even more aroused.



## Part II: Mama Analysis

The relationship between Marketa and Eva is based on a lie, but Marketa is not aware of it and by the end of the chapter, she contemplates leaving Karel for a period so that she can go to visit Eva and Eva's new husband. In this way, she would ultimately be cheating on Karel and becoming what Eva represents in her relationship with Karel. The idea entices Marketa and Eva encourages her, by telling her that it had been established long ago in the first few weeks of Marketa and Karel's relationship that he would be the cheater, not her. For that reason, he will not suspect a thing and Marketa can get away with it.

In fact, if Marketa cheats on Karel with Eva and her husband, she will change the relationship with Karel. For years, Karel has been the cheater and Marketa has been the martyr. They are both tired of the relationship, although neither acknowledges it to the other—only to Eva. In this way, the collective past of Karel and Marketa tires them, bringing them to their present and future actions. They wish to erase their past and forget their history to create a new future.

Mama is an older woman and her loss of memory embarrasses her. While Marketa and Karel want to selectively forget pieces of their relationship, Mama is desperately trying to cling onto some of her memories, which are blurring together and becoming lost. When she finally recites the poem for a second time, she merges a popular Christmas poem with her political recitation of the past, but to her, all that matters is she makes it to the end and when she remembers the final line, feels victorious.

When Marketa learns of Karel's next date with a mistress, both she and Karel are angry. Both of them are tired of being in the relationship, tired of being with the other person. Although Eva saves the night, Marketa will spend the rest of the evening pretending that she is with a headless body instead of Karel. The temptation to stay with Eva and have a threesome with her husband is enticing as a way to avenge some of Karel's behavior and give her a break from the personas they have created for each other.





# Part III: The Angels

## Part III: The Angels Summary

Michelle and Gabrielle are two students in Madame Raphael's class, discussing a play called "Rhinoceros" by Eugene Ionesco. After much debate, the girls decide the main symbolism of the play is meant for mockery and humor. Once they figure out their personal meaning of the play, they break out into fierce laughter. From there, a larger discussion of laughter is analyzed. Kundera brings in a quote from the *Parole de femme* by Saint Annie Leclerc and discusses the different levels and varieties of laughter. Next, Kundera jumps to a tale in his personal past about when he is hired to write astrology columns for a political magazine after he is banned from working by the government. While on the job, he is asked to give the personal astrological reading of a Communist in secret. He gives him the "reading" and the editor of the magazine tells him the powerful man becomes a much nicer, softer man after reading it.

In 1948, Kundera was involved in the political parties of his time and "danced in a ring." He and the other students do this frequently to celebrate a variety of things. Then he is asked to leave the ring for saying the wrong thing. Ever since then, Kundera wanders the streets outside of the rings of celebrants, who are laughing and rejoicing. He watches the dancing with envy and in his recollection, Eluard stands in a ring with other students eventually dancing their way into the sky as they float away, happily, above Kundera's head.

Shortly after, Kundera's secret position as an editor of the political magazine is revealed and the editor who gave him the position is fired and in a lot of fear about what might happen to her and to her burgeoning career. He meets her at a secret apartment for a rendezvous and Kundera has the urge to rape her, although he resists. He says that this urge is a reaction to the fact that since he was asked to leave the ring dancing, he has been falling constantly and the urge is a desire to violently hold onto something in order to stop the falling.

Michelle and Gabrielle finally give their analysis of the play to the class. While they are reciting their beliefs to Madame Raphael's class, a competitive student named Sarah walks up and kicks each of them in the rear, which makes the entire class burst out laughing, including Madame Raphael who believes the action is planned and not malicious. The girls begin to cry, but this is also mis-interpreted by Madame Raphael as crying from extreme laughter and she grabs the girls' hands and the three of them dance in a ring. Eventually, the girls' tears turn into laughter and as they laugh, sing and dance in a ring, they mirror the dance with Eluard in the square in front of Kundera and rise into the sky like angels.



## Part III: The Angels Analysis

The concept of laughter is fully analyzed in this section. Kundera describes the first time that an angel heard the devil laugh. As soon as the devil laughs, the entire feast begins to laugh as the laughter was contagious. The angel recognizes that this form of laughter is directed against God and His creations and so he mimicks the sound, but reverses its meaning. The angel's laughter is meant to rejoice over the well-ordered, well-connected world and rejoice over good things and wisdom. Laughter can be disastrous, harmful, hurtful, or joyous and freeing. The laughter that the girls and Madame Raphael experience, as well as the laughter that Eluard and the celebrating students experience, is the laughter of the angels. Through their use of this laughter and the acceptance of each other, they are lifted from the earth and outside the devil's reach, into the sky to join the angels whom they imitate.

When you hear laughter, there are multiple versions of the laughter. You can have mocking, harmful laughter or cheerful, rejoicing laughter. The idea of being accepted and one of many in a group is a concept that Kundera ties with laughter. This version of laughter and belonging will be compared to the absolute isolation of Tamina and her family and friends. Understanding this variation of acceptance, in comparison with Tamina's absolute betrayal and isolation, is an important counterpoint to the theme of laughter, friendship and happiness.

To be outside of the laughter, the celebrating and the ring is to be within the devil's grasp. Here, then, the urge to rape B., the editor of the political magazine, makes more sense since Kundera is not with the angels, but is on his own, outside the group, falling. Kundera is outside the circle and the society at large is trying to erase his existence. His previous publications have been erased, his phone number in the telephone book and his literal history have been abolished. He is trying to bring himself back to life through the secretive astrology columns in the political magazine that gets his editor friend in trouble. Through his astrology readings, he gives others a hope for their future, while trying to establish a future of his own.



## Part IV: Lost Letters

### Part IV: Lost Letters Summary

The main character (as deemed by Kundera later in the novel) is introduced. She is one of the two or three fictionalized characters that Kundera assumes are born every second on earth. Tamina works as a waitress in a small cafe and earns very little money. She is thought to be a good listener because she does not interrupt others with stories about herself. Bibi is a regular customer and tells Tamina that she is going to Prague for the summer. Tamina asks her to pick up a parcel at her stepmother's house, which Bibi promises to do. Tamina left Bohemia with her husband illegally and in order to not arouse suspicion, they left the parcel with all of their love letters to one another at her stepmother's home. While they are abroad, Tamina's husband becomes ill and dies. She is alone and spends her time recreating her husband and their time together. She tries to recreate the notebooks filled with their past and love letters or even his face, but she forgets past vacations, memories and only has his passport picture as a memory.

Tamina is described as being on a raft, only looking back. Losing her past, Tamina is also losing herself since she is not doing anything to create a present or future for herself. If she has the notebooks of her past, she can remember more memories and help to redefine her self a little better for a little longer. Shortly after her husband's death, Tamina swallows a bottle of prescription pills and swims out into the sea. Rather than become sleepy and sink, she instead becomes revitalized and finds a treasured silence within her. She comes back to shore and continues to live. This swimming episode is a foreshadowing of how Tamina will eventually die in future chapters.

Bibi is convinced that she is going to write a novel. She contacts Banaka, the local novelist, to ask his opinion even though his novels are so bad he negatively judges the people that read his works. Kundera now describes graphomania, which is the obsessive drive to write a book. In order for this condition to exist, the people in the society must have an elevated sense of well-being, an absence of dramatic events in their life and a general isolation between individuals.

Bibi offhandedly remarks to Tamina that she will not be going to Prague after all, which leads Tamina to talk to a man named Hugo. Hugo takes her to the zoo for the afternoon in an effort to impress her. She sees a number of ostriches that are mute, opening and closing their mouths aggressively as if wanting to warn Tamina about something, but unable to do so. She dreams of the ostriches, knowing they are a sign about her lost letters. Tamina has always known that if she sleeps with another man, she will be able to see her husband everywhere, which is exactly what happens. Afterwards the revulsion of Hugo overrides the memories of her late husband. Hugo also reverses his promise to go to Prague to get the letters for her after they sleep together. After this announcement, Tamina is permanently silent.



## Part IV: Lost Letters Analysis

Tamina is the very embodiment of living in the past, trying to stop the inevitable flow of time replacing the past with the present. After her husband dies, Tamina longs for love letters and notebooks that she only half-heartedly filled when the memories were being created. In her mind, the past is all there is left to live for and in this sense, Tamina dies the day that her husband passes away. She treasures their love letters and notebooks as if they are precious gems, repulsed by the idea that her stepmother or other eyes have read the words meant just for her and her husband.

Just like Zdena controls a piece of Mirek's life by not relinquishing his former love letters to her, so Tamina's stepmother holds onto a piece of Tamina's life and relationship by holding onto their love letters. Unlike Mirek, however, Tamina does not want to erase the former relationship and destroy the letters, but elevate the letters to a higher position, clinging and treasuring each past action and memory together. Her relationship with her family is highlighted through her request for the letters. Through a variety of communications, we can see that Tamina truly has no one in the world. Her stepmother feels ill will towards her, while her father is even less helpful. Despite expensive phone calls to them, Tamina's family never asks how she is or how her husband is, why she would want the lost letters or anything else about her. Instead, they concentrate on themselves. By calling and talking to them, Tamina is reinforced in the idea that she is all alone. She feels her letters have been ravaged like she was, but her letters are not ravaged by strangers. They are ravaged by her own family, which makes the pain even more pronounced.

During their parting conversation, Hugo remarks that if everyone keeps silent, they will all end up slaves, which is what Tamina becomes. By not arguing and fighting for her right to control and own her own past with her love letters, she becomes subject to others' vacation schedules and empty promises. For this reason, her silence keeps her in the cage of the past, in a small job with no personal rewards or challenges. When Hugo, her last hope, blithely turns down her request to go to Prague despite earlier promises to do so, Tamina is violently physically ill as the realization that she is a slave to her past is fully developed.

Graphomania is an interesting concept that only works when a number of factors combine. The only difference between Goethe and the average everyday writer is not the passion that goes into the writing, as Kundera points out, but it is the outcome that is produced from the writing. In order for graphomania to exist, there needs to be an elevated sense of well-being in society, allowing a high number of people to do useless activities like write. There needs to be a generally high amount of isolation among individuals so that the writer feels the need to write in order to establish a comradeship with another human being. Finally, there needs to be an absolute shortage of social changes and upheaval in the society. Without dramatic events, writers will create the environment of chaos through and within the world of the novel.



Interestingly, Kundera titles two chapters "Lost Letters" and two chapters "The Angels." In this way, Kundera is fully developing the same idea from two different angles. In the first section of Lost Letters, Mirek wants his letters back in a desperate attempt to erase a former relationship. For Tamina, the lost letters are what she lives for. She wants these letters back in order to cherish a former relationship. In both instances, however, the letters represent for both characters a method through which they hope to control their past.



## Part V: Litost

### Part V: Litost Summary

Kristyna is a 30-year-old woman who is married to a butcher and occasionally has an affair with an auto mechanic. One day, she meets a student on his vacation and they begin an affair, although it is wholly non-physical (despite the student's best attempts!) No one has ever spoken to Kristyna about philosophy and higher thinking, which entices her. At the end of summer, Kristyna and the student agree to meet in the city at the student's meager apartment.

Kundera introduces us to the concept of litost, which is a Czech word that means a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery. The student has had a previously bad relationship with his ex-girlfriend and in the presence of his litost, Kristyna comes to him like a band-aid, soothing his ego with her obvious worship of his ego and knowledge.

Kristyna and the student agree to meet in the city on a particular weekend. The day before she is set to arrive, the student is in class with a professor Kundera refers to as Voltaire. He invites him to a meeting at the Writer's Club, which the student turns down to spend time with Kristyna. When Kristyna arrives in the city, however, her provincial looks (clumsy black beads and gold tooth) appear ridiculous next to the cosmopolitan girls of Prague. He regrets turning down the Writer's Club meeting and convinces Kristyna slyly that he should go to the meeting after all. Kristyna agrees, so long as the famous poet the student calls Goethe signs her an inscription in a book.

The student spends the evening in the presence of great minds, debating poetry and philosophical tenets among great men and has Goethe sign his book. That evening, the student returns home to Kristyna, fully restored after the poets cast her in a better light, yet after an evening together, Kristyna and the student never consummate their relationship due to a miscommunication. She leaves the next day on the train with her book with its inscription, which is far more valuable to her than anything else, while the student settles into litost as he realizes the missed opportunity. The student returns to the Writers Club, fully immersed in his litost and it is here that the same writers from the evening before recognize that he is a poet, one of them.

### Part V: Litost Analysis

The relationship between lovers is analyzed in this section. Specifically, the relationship of litost to romance is important. Litost for the student both leads to his relationship with Kristyna as well as his eventual acceptance with the other great men and poets he meets at the Writer's Club. Love, as Kundera defines it, is a desire for absolute identity—a person without a past. However, as the relationship continues and the past and illusion of identity disappears, love spawns litost for the individual, in this case the



student. Through the motions of litost, Kristyna is a salve that restores the student's identity and confidence within himself.

To be a great poet and philosopher, litost is essential. At one point, the student stands up to defend the man Kundera is calling Lermontov by stating that only a poet can understand the value of what he writes and others may never get it at all. In this way, the student's identity as a poet is defined by his knowledge of his words and understanding of their complete value.

Finally, Kundera points out the story of the Czechs is the story of litost, of a country that yells they will not accept compromises when they are in fact being soundly defeated without hope of victory. When Kristyna leaves the student without consummating their relationship, he is consumed with litost. Yet, it is this litost that the other poets recognize and respond to, accepting him as one of their own so his identity is again established as absolute and a different kind of loving relationship begins.



# Part VI: The Angels

## Part VI: The Angels Summary

Kundera blurs the historical moments of Clementis and Gottwald, Kafka and the President heretofore referred to as the President of Forgetting, Svoboda. He talks about Husak's desire to take over the country and Hubl remarks that you can "liquidate its people" by erasing their memory of their previous culture. He will be jailed six months later for these comments and Kundera's father becomes ill at the same time. Kundera's father is losing his memory and all he has left to say is "That's strange." Eventually, Papa will pass away a few days after he hears Husak making a speech about the importance of children to our future outside his hospital window.

One day, Tamina does not come back to work. The police check her apartment, but they find it tidy and organized with nothing suspicious. Her case is eventually forgotten and replaced with other more pressing issues. On the day she disappears, a man orders a coke and asks her if she wants to go to a place where things have no weight. She happily agrees and they get into a red sports car together. The man's name is Raphael and he leads her down beside a lake. He grabs her and she cannot possibly get free. She gets into a small boat with a boy who is rowing, never asking their destination. After awhile, she takes over for the boy who is tired. She rows until they reach an island filled with children, where she is given a room with all the other children and made to bathe and live amongst them without any privacy whatsoever. Her husband died in a hospital with no privacy and her new living arrangements mimic this setting. Although she argues, she is told that she does not need her own room and lives in the open with the rest of the children, similar to how her husband was in the moments before his death in the hospital. She eventually settles into the lifestyle where she has no memory and recollection of anything that came before. The memory of her husband no longer torments her because she is in a place where there is no history.

Thanks to Tamina's size and advanced dexterity, the children on whose team she has been assigned start to win all of their games. They reward her by raping her, although it is a subtle and initially sensual experience for her. From that moment on, she regards the children differently and one day, jumps into the water to swim away from the island. Despite swimming for the rest of the day and all through the night, she awakes to find she has swum less than 100 yards from the island and starts to give up hope. Some of the children jump into a boat and paddle next to her to watch her passively as she drowns in front of them.

## Part VI: The Angels Analysis

This chapter covers the concepts of forgetting, our collective past and memories. With each successive new dictatorship, the changes revise the names of the streets and remove the monuments of the past heroes. By changing the past and revising what the





society as a whole can remember, the culture of the conquered people becomes fluid and less concrete.

The death of Kundera's father plays an important part in the story because it explains the background and impetus behind writing the novel to begin with. Kundera's father has a final effort to understand Beethoven and his variations on a theme. Through Kundera's writing, he too is attempting to analyze and understand the same thing, taking up where his father left off with his death. Kundera remarks that like Beethoven's final acts, his book is a novel on variations. It is a number of voyages leading into and through one theme. With this in mind, he makes Tamina his principal character. In the beginning chapters of Tamina's introduction, she is the embodiment of memories, cherishing the past to the extreme. Once she takes the trip with Raphael in his red sports car, she enters into the theme of death. On the coast, just before she leaves with the rowing boat, she has one final new memory of her husband and reflects that he is alive in her sadness and she must go searching for him!

Landing on the island of the children, she finds the country in direct contrast to where she has been living. Here, on the island of children, she has no history as children have no past. In the world, she was living too much in the past, bogged down by her history. With the children, she plays games and has no recollection of her history, feeling light and without the weight of memories. When she attempts to swim back, she cannot go anywhere because she has already passed on. Entering the land without memory, she cannot reverse her living and enter into a world with a deluge of memories. It is for that reason that she essentially swims in place, completing the suicide attempt of so long ago and drowning. Through her drowning and sadness, she will continue her search for her husband in death.

This is the second chapter entitled "The Angels." Similar to the repetition of the "Lost Letters," Kundera analyzes the different paths the characters take to finish their lives. For Gabrielle, Michelle and Madame Raphael or Eluard and the celebrants in the street, the ring dance and its accompanying laughter cause them to rise higher, into the sky, becoming angels through comradeship and happiness. For Tamina, her death journey and trip to the children represents a different version of the angels. She is delivered from her daily life, although she does not rise into the sky like the others. Instead, she is released from memory and her past by traveling to the land of children without consequences, history or a past. Interestingly, while Madame Raphael takes the girls to the sky, it is a young man named Raphael that takes Tamina to the island of forgetting.



## Part VII: The Border

### Part VII: The Border Summary

Whenever Jan and Edwige make love, she is perfectly silent which prompts Jan to swear he will never repeat the act with her again. He meets an actress named Hanna who adores his friend Passer. Currently, all of society adores Passer, who has cancer, but does not believe the doctors and walks around elated and happy. She meets him at the country home of the Clevises' and she and Passer go picking mushrooms together, wandering to a local cafe and drinking wine until they slowly wander back home. Later in the novel, Passer will say that although he has been forbidden to walk long distances or drink wine anymore, it was one of the happiest moments of his life because Hanna did not treat him like he was sick, unlike the rest of his friends and acquaintances. Unfortunately, the trip together sends Passer to the hospital and the Clementis' tell Jan that he should visit him.

Jan contemplates the idea of a border. He meets a woman on a train and realizes that although she is friendly to him, he is repeating on her the advances he has tried many times in the past on other women and the novelty and spontaneity wears off. Although she invites him to her house later, he denies her due to a lack of real connection between them. Later, at Edwige's house, she admits that making love is not that important to her and Jan happily climbs into bed next to her and drifts off to sleep.

Passer passes away and during the funeral, an errant hat drifts onto the coffin of Passer as it is being lowered into the earth and a random man is giving a very solemn speech. The entire situation begs for laughter, but no one says a word throughout the funeral process. Juxtaposed next to this scene, Jan goes to a woman named Barbara's home. She has invited him to a sex party at her house, an invitation he has never accepted in the past, but now accepts because he will be moving to the United States soon. While there, he finds himself in a similar situation with a bald man he immediately befriends and starts laughing, making the serious sex party a scandal through their scandalous laughter. Barbara becomes infuriated and kicks both of the men out of her party.

Jan returns home and he and Edwige go to the beach with a number of nudists. They communicate with each other without really understanding each other and finally find themselves in an everyday conversation with other beachgoers in the nude, discussing politics, which is where the novel ends.

### Part VII: The Border Analysis

The novel ends with the whimper of a perversion of a typical, cheesy social gathering—only this time, the participants are nude and without self-awareness or care. The situation is laughable, which is how Kundera ends the novel.



Inappropriate laughter is the final variation on the theme of laughter in the book. Both the funeral and the sex party both find Jan in a situation where laughter is not socially acceptable, but difficult to suppress since it has arrived at a time when it was least expected.

The idea of borders through repetition is another concept covered in this chapter. In light of the historical actions of Jan, he defines his border only as the limit of repetitions that he can perform a specific act. He fails in picking up the woman on the train because he does not believe his own mock spontaneity and the actions he has performed numerous times before. For this reason, he cannot continue to pick up women and instead, marks an important point for he and Edwige.

Passer is fighting death and his disease through his actions and general ignorance of what the doctors are telling him to do. All of his comrades have a lot of respect and admiration for Passer and how he is treating his disease, yet these actions kill him. By drinking with Hanna and walking long distances, Passer feels the most alive he has ever felt—yet he also succumbs to his death. While fighting his death, Passer repeatedly bangs on the table as if to loudly proclaim he is very much still alive. Through his constant repetitions of banging the table, however, Passer is indicating the opposite. With each successive banging, he is showing that he is scared, weak and vulnerable. In comparison, with each repetition of Jan "spontaneously" picking up a new woman, his sincerity diminishes and the obvious planning behind his gestures is more pronounced. For this reason, Jan's border is in the repetitions when he picks up a woman while Passer's border becomes the constant pounding on the table.



# Characters

## Tamina

Tamina is the main character of the book, as deemed by Kundera or the "I" character. We follow her story for most of the novel's entirety. She has left Prague for a small provincial town that Kundera refuses to name, although this is where Tamina lives now. Her husband dies shortly after escaping from Prague and Tamina is left to herself. She tries to commit suicide by swallowing a number of prescription pills and swimming out to sea, but instead of drowning she is revitalized and finds peace and silence. She returns to town and serves coffee in a bar, making very little money. She is thought to be a great listener because she never interrupts with stories about herself, when in fact Tamina is trying to hold onto silence because it is in silence she can best remember her deceased husband. She seems to listen to other men intently because she is really recreating her husband's face over theirs in order to hold onto his memory. She is fighting time's erasure of her memory and for this reason, asks a regular patron of the cafe to pick up her old love letters while in Prague. The woman never goes to Prague and along the way, Tamina finds out that her old love letters and notebooks have been read by other eyes and she laments losing all of these past memories forever.

One day, she disappears from her job. A man in a red sports car comes to her while she is in the cafe alone and offers to take her to a place with no weight. She is taken to a boat on the edge of a river and then to a small island filled with children. She is left here, alone, and forced to play their games and be subject to their inquisitive touches. One day, she finally runs to the shore to swim back to where she lived before, but sinks and drowns, completing her original suicide attempt.

## Kundera or the Character

Throughout the novel, Kundera or the character "I" appears to give presumably factual accounts and historical events that happen as a backdrop to the vignettes. By juxtaposing the historical accounts with those of the fictional characters, the re-tellings give more color and personality to the characters by making the reader feel as though the character "I" exists in the same space as these characters. Through his depictions of things that have happened in the past, Kundera gives us a view into his perspective and thoughts, no matter how ugly or brutal. These stories also give him, the author, the chance to incorporate personal analysis, quotations and more to further promote various concepts in the book, including death, forgetting, memory, the past, inclusion, laughter and more.

## Mirek

An important political figure and scientist in the Czech Republic, Mirek's story and his drive to find letters from an old lover will set the stage and thematic foundation for the



book. Specifically, his story—although utterly separated from the story of Tamina—will mirror Tamina's drive for her own love letters. Mirek comes to power as a scientist shortly after his wife died, leaving him alone with his son. Since the state needs Mirek with his superior scientific advances, he can afford to be caulous and critical of the state at a time when nobody else in the country can make any comments. He appears on television frequently and becomes well-known throughout the country. The Russians invade his country, however, and he refuses to give up his convictions, a fact which causes him to lose his job. From then on, the police follow him and find ways to incriminate him for his beliefs.

## Zdena

The counterpart in Mirek's story, Zdena's once-close relationship with Mirek gives her power and control over his history. She holds onto their relationship as she becomes a member of the political party in which he is so powerful, reminding everyone that she and Mirek used to be a couple. After Mirek leaves her and shows he is embarrassed by her, she lives to have him remember their relationship, referring to situations that remind him and others of how close they once were. When Zdena witnesses the Russian tanks roll into their city, she rejoices because she knows Mirek will finally lose his power and ego. She shows him what faithfulness is when he is at his lowest point and her reason for living is revealed.

## Marketa

Karel's wife, she has an affair with one of her husband's mistresses, Eva. She invites Karel's mother to visit them after the mother loses her husband, even though Marketa and Karel's mother do not get along very well. Her analysis and relationship with Karel is a statement on love and how actions in a couple's collective past set the stage for their present and future actions. During Eva's stay, both Karel and Marketa decide they are tired of operating in the same old way because of trivial actions they made in the past in their relationship.

## Karel

Marketa's husband, he is tired of his relationship with his wife, despite his love for her. Both Karel and Marketa love one another, but Karel longs for freedom and an escape from his life where everything is programmed and controlled, based on his past actions. He is a woman chaser and frequently has relationships with other women, which Marketa is aware of. For this reason, he is permanently made to feel guilty in his relationship with Marketa.



## Eva

A self-proclaimed man chaser, Eva goes to visit Marketa and Karel during the same time that Karel's mother stays with them. Eva loves both Marketa and Karel and during her single night there, they all share a romantic relationship together.

## Gabrielle & Michelle

Two students in Madame Raphael's class, they analyze a play named *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco. Together, they try to determine the meaning of different symbols, finally coming to the conclusion that the author wrote the piece to appeal to the absurdity of the situation. While reciting their interpretation in Madame Raphael's class, a class rival named Sarah kicks the girls in the back, causing the class to laugh at them, including Madame Raphael who mistakes the gesture as one that was planned. The teacher takes the girls by the hands and they dance in a circle until they finally fly into the sky as angels, dancing and laughing as one.

## Madame Raphael

The teacher of Gabrielle and Michelle, she has been searching for souls that she relates to her entire life. She believes dancing in a ring is magic, and seeks to be included in such an intimate way. She joins a variety of organizations throughout her life in an effort to be accepted and join in a dancing ring. When she finally dances with Gabrielle and Michelle, they rise into the sky and become angels, just like her namesake.

## Bibi

The regular at Tamina's cafe who initially plants the idea in Tamina's head that she will pick up Tamina's old love letters during a vacation to Prague.

## Hugo

Tamina's second grasp at hope after Bibi fails her; their short relationship demonstrates to Tamina how fully dependent she is on others and her actions with Hugo will erase the last pieces of her husband's physical appearance from her memory as his revulsion is stronger than her husband's memory.

## Edwige

Jan's lover at the age of 45, they communicate without really ever understanding each other. She does not have any fear of being naked or exposed physically.



## **Passer**

A friend of Jan's, he is told he has cancer, but fights it by acting more happy and more alive than anyone else surrounding him.

## **Jan**

Jan is dating Edwige, an older man of 45 years of age, and contemplates the idea of a border that keeps a person from another in life.



# Objects/Places

## Writer's Club

Where the student goes to talk and listen in on a number of the country's greatest minds, including "Goethe," "Boccaccio," "Voltaire" and "Lermatov"

## Tamina's Cafe

The place where Tamina works day after day, it is here where the seed is planted that she might get her notebooks back, where she listens patiently to her regular customers and where she lives her life being as silent as possible. It is also here where Raphael will pick her up to take her away finally.

## Golden Ring

Kundera's symbol for Tamina's silence, it represents her past and her desire to hold onto the peace that comes with her memories. When she sees the mute ostriches at the zoo, she later dreams of them in relation to this golden ring—her greatest possession that she holds in her mouth.

## Mama's Poem

Although a simple, revolutionary poem at the time, Mama's poem takes on new meaning when she tries to recite it to her son and daughter-in-law, Marketa. She cannot remember the final stanza and gets confused as to when she recited it the first time. For this reason, the poem comes to represent her past and how her memories are failing her until she obsessively recites the poem again, getting to the final stanza for the last time.

## Raphael's Red Sports Car

This represents Tamina's acceptance towards her journey to death.

## Mushrooms

Picking mushrooms with Hanna the actress becomes Passers's final last moments of happiness, representing his life and negation of death's imminence.





## **Beethoven's variations**

For Kundera's father, understanding Beethoven's variations is a life goal. As he loses his speech, he says to Kundera one day that he finally understands. For the novel, Beethoven's variations inspire the impetus behind the book, to delve into the interior of a theme more and more to understand it.

## **Political Magazine**

When Kundera writes for a little while as an astrologer in the political magazine edited by R., he momentarily resumes his identity and comes back from the world of non-existence, having his words published again for hundreds and thousands to read (even if they do not realize they are his words).

## **Tamina's Notebooks**

Although originally not important or precious to her, as Tamina lives more and more in the past, her notebooks come to symbolize her lost relationship with her husband. They are the key to all of her lost memories with him and she lives only to have them returned to her and again to take control of her life.

## **Love Letters Between Zdena and Mirek**

For Zdena, the love letters from Mirek have always been proof of their relationship and passionate love for one another at a specific time. For Mirek, it is an embarrassment and stain on his life that he wants to erase. He risks everything to get his letters back in order to gain control of his past, without her influence.

# Social Sensitivity

A pervasive social concern in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is life under communism, particularly the repressive type of communism imposed on the Czechs by the Russians.

Perhaps the most surprising feature about the everyday life of the Czechs, as depicted by Kundera, is their unbridled pursuit of liberated sex, including here one menage a trois and one scene of group sex. These scenes are played more for their humor than for their eroticism, and so also is a spirited and somewhat drunken meeting of the Writers' Club, where a main item of conversation is sex. Failure to get enough sex is said to form the basis of one acerbic poet's poetics, and a student who cannot pull himself away from the meeting to complete a seduction falls under the same danger. Readers may conclude that the Czechs pursue sex so avidly because (aside from the usual reasons) it is one of the few activities they can still enjoy in relative freedom. Political activity or freedom of expression can mean being tailed by the secret police, arrested, and sent to prison, into internal exile, or up the smokestack of the crematorium.

Yet, as Kundera notes, under communism the political and the personal are often interrelated, cannot be separated, much as capitalists have trouble separating business and pleasure. Not even sex in Bohemia, it seems, is free of politics. A man's mistress accuses him of making love like an "intellectual" (a code word for "a person who failed to understand life and was cut off from the people" and therefore deserved hanging), and after the two "comrades" part ways — he to become a liberal, she a hardened ideologue — he is ashamed of the love letters he wrote her and tries many years later to get them back. He wants to destroy the evidence of their relationship and thus revise his personal history, just as the state airbrushes purged political leaders from old photographs and revises its history. In contrast, a Czech exile in Western Europe cannot return to her homeland to get the letters and notebooks that are the only record of her and her husband's love, the memory of which she is trying to preserve. A mother who tries to manage her son and daughter-in-law (two of the menage a trois, on whom the mother walks in at the most embarrassing time) suggests the intrusion of the state into people's private lives. So also does a group of children who, in a dreamlike fantasy, ravish the widowed exile. In addition, the fantasy might suggest the state's encouragement of sex, like drinking, as a political diversion. These details of everyday life under communism make for fascinating reading.

## Techniques

The most striking feature about *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is the daring way Kundera blends modes or shifts about from one mode to another — history, autobiography, fictional narrative, philosophical commentary, and fantasy. The different modes give the novel great variety and complexity, but at the same time, as different approaches to the same themes, the modes reinforce each other. For example, the fantasy of the island of children, who symbolize the final result of the totalitarian state ("and perhaps our entire technical age," as Kundera says in an afterword to the Penguin edition), gains its context from and sums up the other stories. The novel also has seven sections, each containing a separate narrative (two dealing with Tamina) that could stand alone, but together they again reinforce each other through their parallels and contrasts. Borrowing a term from music, Kundera describes the novel as "a polyphony," but some critics have insisted it is only a collection of related stories in the manner of *Laughable Loves* (1969). Certainly, as Kundera's most experimental work, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* expands the conception of what a novel is.



# Themes

## Laughter

Throughout the novel, laughter is a common theme that reappears in a variety of forms. Kundera analyzes and discusses the varieties of laughter and the situations in which they can appear.

The laughter Jan nearly experiences at Passer's funeral and at Barbara's party represents the kind of laughter that is diabolical and inappropriate. Kundera describes the birth of laughter as when the devil emits shrill and spasmodic sounds at a feast to represent the mockery of the world and undermine God and His creation. In response, an angel mimicks the sound, but perverts its original meaning to be laughter that rejoices in the world and its order and wisdom. In this way, laughter can be either angelic or devilish.

When Michelle and Gabrielle cry and then turn to laughter after being publicly mocked, their laughter and ring dance symbolize an acceptance and celebration of the world, which causes the entire ring to lift into the sky towards the angels. The same can be said for Eluard and his celebratory dancers in the square. Their pure joy lifts them higher as they are dancing on top of Kundera, above his perspective and filled with happiness. Kundera, on the other hand, only longs for the sarcastic and bitter laughter that he hopes he will hear from his astrology columns, which the editor R. finally gives him unknowingly. Laughter is the means by which acceptance is given or through which a bitter deal with the devil is made.

## Memories

The importance of the past and its memories cannot be underestimated in this novel. It is the driving force or source of manipulation throughout the variety of situations played out in the novel.

For Tamina, of course, memories and the past are all she lives for. After her husband passes away and her suicide attempt fails, she finds a peaceful silence in solitude. She spends her days trying to recreate her husband's face on the faces of other men because all she has left of her husband is a bad passport photo. She longs to have her old notebooks and love letters from him back, but is a slave to other people and their whimsical natures because she cannot face the idea of returning to Prague to get the letters herself. When she finds out that her stepmother has read her letters and they have been violated, she is initially affronted at the idea of someone reading letters meant for her eyes only, but after she is also violated, she wants the letters all the more. When no one can help her retrieve them, she loses hope and stops actively searching for her husband in the memories of the past.



Against the political backdrop of conquering dictators and governments, the city and society at large have trouble with their memories and past. As Kundera highlights with his example of the street that has been given a number of names, the concrete memories of the past become more flexible with time and if you erase the past culture and history, its collective memories, books and recordings, then you can gain a greater control over its people, who cannot be united in one common past. With an array of fluid memories in the collective societal past, the society does not have one ideal they are fighting for and striving to maintain. As they forget, they lose their contours, just as Tamina starts to do as she loses the specific memories of her late husband.

## Litost

Litost, as defined by Kundera, is the state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery. In the novel, the student (the only character not given a name) represents litost. All of the student's relationships are defined by his litost.

The student, in essence, represents Kundera's country of the Czech Republic for Kundera calls the story of the Czechs a story of litost. Their's is an endless story of rebellion and defeat that contributes to the very ruin of their society. Russian tanks invade Czech in 1968 and despite their imminent defeat, the Czechs proudly proclaim that they do not want compromise, they want victory! In the face of their destruction, they are only interested in victory because the sight of their inevitable doom is too much for them to acknowledge.

The student's previous relationship before Kristyna is immersed in litost as well. When his old girlfriend swims faster and stronger than he, his confidence is compromised and he will later slap her for "scaring" him when in reality his pride is hurt. His litost at realizing that her identity is not an absolute that depends on their love destroys their entire relationship. It is his hurt pride that allows him to enter the serious relationship with Kristyna, a married woman from a small town with whom he has nothing in common. He appreciates Kristyna for the sole reason that she worships his intellect and restores his identity for him.

Finally, when he and Kristyna never consummate their relationship in Prague, he is filled with litost and despair at the missed opportunity because of miscommunication. In this frame of mind, he returns to the Writers Club and is accepted among the other great minds and poets immediately for having the litost that connects him with this group of individuals.

Litost plays an important role in the novel as a means to better define Tamina. Through the depiction of litost in the student, we understand it in relation to Tamina, who has lost everyone dear to her in her life, but is not fully confronting her own misery just yet. Tamina embraces her litost in the end through her silence and final acceptance that she has lost everything in life.



## Significant Topics

A number of unhappy themes run through *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, two of which are referred to in the sardonic title. The title, which could be to a soothing child's story, suggests the attitude of childlike but sinister naivete that the communist state tries to instill in its citizens so that they can be better managed. Other key imagery compares communist faith to fundamentalist religion. The laughter referred to is the "laughter of the angels" — i.e., selfrighteous ideologues who joy in their "idyllic vision" so fanatically that they are quite willing to punish or even kill dissenters. The initial appeal of the manifesto-thumping ideologues and the desire of other people to share such joy are understandable, but the truth of the idyllic vision cannot be tested since it conveniently lies in the future.

Meanwhile the vision justifies all kinds of unsavory methods to reach it, which the state tries to cover up and erase from memory, just as it tries to erase any memory of historical events or a cultural past that might conflict with the vision. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* makes clear that the communist regime would like the Czechs and Slovaks to forget about their nationalist aspirations and the 1968 Russian invasion. A variation of the theme is how the rest of the world so soon forgot.

Opposed to the laughter of the angels is the laughter of the devil — i.e., the total skeptic or nihilist who mocks everything, including the angels' selfrighteous stance. Obviously the angels and the devil cannot stand each other, but just as obviously both of their responses are too extreme. Kundera confesses that during his youth he once belonged to the company of the angels, but he was soon booted out, apparently because he asked too many questions or could not keep from mocking. Now he admits his natural inclination toward the devil. But the reader might see his inclination as, in part, a reaction to life under communism, which seems as likely to produce devils as angels: Once a true believer becomes disillusioned with the idyllic vision, there are few alternatives.

Related to the laughter of the devil is *litost*, a Czech concept that encompasses a host of unhappy and negative feelings — frustration, humiliation, remorse, desire for revenge, among others — but can be translated for short as "spite." For example, an extreme form of *litost* is "revenge by suicide." There is also "impacted *litost*," which has no convenient way of being vented. Kundera develops the theme of *litost* humorously, since he sees *litost* as an immature reaction — notably in the sexually frustrated student. But he also sees the historically denied Czechs and Slovaks suffering from cultural *litost*, which compels them to seek "revenge by suicide" as a nation. Kundera does not confess to any *litost*, but he does express a more mature version, writing out of a sense of banishment — of denial, exclusion, and exile — that sums up his other themes and serves as a metaphor for the modern human condition.



# Style

## Point of View

Throughout the novel, the point of view is held by the main characters within the particular vignette. The point of view can easily change, however, while a character's story is being told. For this reason, we can get another perspective on the story at times. For example, while Tamina's story is being told, the storyline abruptly stops so Kundera can tell a story about a historical event. In this way, the characters are given more realism. While juxtaposing them next to a historical event that took place in Czech, the character of Tamina has a backdrop that makes her both more concrete to the reader, as well as highlighting a bit of the culture that surrounds her.

Kundera is very self-aware throughout the novel. For example, he will describe Mirek's relationship with his destiny on page 14 and immediately start the next paragraph with "Please understand me:" In this way, the reader does not feel as though Kundera is a disconnected voice throughout the reading, but instead is hearing a personal re-telling of events by Kundera himself. While the author Kundera and the character of Kundera are two distinct entities, this elevated level of self-awareness gives the reader a strong sense of comraderie with the characters and especially with Kundera as narrator.

## Setting

The novel takes place in a variety of mundane environments. For Mirek, the setting is mostly his car, while Tamina's actions mostly occur in the cafe in which she works. The physical location of the characters is not terrifically important; it is what is going on in their lives and in their minds that holds the significance. In fact, Kundera does not name the town in which Tamina lives, only saying it is a provincial town that does not speak Czech and that Prague is where she is from. This explanation holds more meaning as you learn that, in essence, Tamina does not live or work where she spends her day-to-day life, but is instead still in Prague, with her lost husband and memories, thus making the name of the provincial town an inconsequential fact.

The beach Jan and Edwige walk at the end of the novel could be any beach, but the only location of significance or importance is Prague and the Czech Republic,. These locations are also characters and representations of the people. Both the city and the country have no collective memory and trouble recollecting their past, which makes the locations an ideal fit for the rest of the novel.

## Language and Meaning

The language used throughout the novel is conversational and casual. Kundera admits secret thoughts like his violent desire to rape his friend the editor at times, while completely giving the dialogue and thoughts behind all of his characters' actions. At



times, he will insert his own thought or analysis during the character's tale, such as when Kundera remarks on page 223, while describing Tamina's husband's frequent interrogation of her, "...love is a continual interrogation. I don't know of a better definition of love."

In this way, the reader feels a stronger connection to the novel, as if it is being told just for them. Here are Kundera's personal thoughts on what is happening and the reader can internally reflect on these statements along with the characters' events, thoughts and actions. In this way, too, the novel takes on the character of more than a simple fiction, but instead becomes a more philosophical and analytical approach to the themes, rather than a simple retelling of what happens to the characters themselves. Kundera wants the novel's emphasis to be thematic, not a tale of various characters. The characters are simply means through which he can analyze the themes covered.

## Structure

The structure of the novel is varied and fragmented, much as it would be if you were listening to a colleague, friend or neighbor tell you a story. There are digressions that end up being relevant and tied to the main events transpiring throughout the novel, but the reader might not initially see the connection. The stories are intertwined in their themes, although the only repeating character in different vignettes is Jan. Sometimes, Kundera will start and finish a story with the characters by the end of a section, while other times, such as with the story of his father's death or with Tamina, the elements, characters and themes of the story will traverse into other stories and sections of the novel.





## Quotes

"Since there is not a single historic event we can count on being commonly known, I must speak of events that took place a few years ago," Part I, p. 10.

"He was in love with his destiny, and even his march toward ruin seemed noble and beautiful to him," Part I, p. 14.

"He wanted to efface her from the photograph of his life not because he had not loved her but because he had," Part I, p. 30.

"With eloquent concision, it expressed the entire situation of her life: everything Marketa did she did for Karel and because of Karel," Part II, p. 51.

"He longed to run away to a place where he could weave his own story, weave it by himself to his own taste and out of the reach of loving eyes. And deep down he did not even care about weaving himself a story, he simply wanted to be alone," Part II p. 57.

"Between the two of you, it's been established once and for all that it's you and not he who has the suspicions. You really have no reason to fear he suspects anything," Part II, p. 71.

"The only amusing thing about it all was my existence, the existence of a man erased from history, from literary histories and from the telephone book, of a dead man now returned to life in an amazing reincarnation to preach the great truth of astrology to hundreds of thousands of young people in a socialist country," Part III, p. 84.

"If there were too much incontestable meaning in the world (the angels' power), man would succumb under its weight. If the world were to lose all its meaning (the devils' reign), we could not live either," Part III, p. 86.

"Because ever since they expelled me from the ring dance, I have not stopped falling, I am still falling, and all they have done now is push me once again to make me fall still farther, still deeper, farther and farther from my country into the deserted space of a world where the fearsome laughter of the angels ring out, drowning all my words with its jangle," Part III, p. 106.

"I calculate that two or three new fictional characters are baptized here on earth every second," Part IV, p. 109.

"For Tamina is adrift on a raft and looking back, looking only back. Her entire being contains only what she sees there, far behind her. Just as her past contracts, disintegrates, dissolves, so Tamina is shrinking and losing her contours," Part IV, p. 119.

"One morning (and it will be soon), when everyone wakes up as a writer, the age of universal deafness and incomprehension will have arrived," Part IV, p. 147.



"Poets, what you're seeing overhead is not the sky but your mothers' enormous skirts! You're all living under your mothers' skirts!" Part V, p. 185.

"Joking is a barrier between man and the world. Joking is the enemy of love and poetry," Part V, p. 199.

"You begin to liquidate a people," Hubl said, "by taking away its memory. You destroy its books, its culture, its history. And then others write other books for it, give another culture to it, invent another history for it. Then the people slowly begins (sic) to forget what it is and what it was. The world at large forgets it still faster," Part V, p. 218.

"This book is a novel in the form of variations. The various parts follow each other like the various stages of a voyage leading into the interior of a theme, the interior of a thought, the interior of a single, unique situation, the understanding of which recedes from my sight into the distance," Part V, p. 227.

"...she had fallen far back to a time when her husband did not exist, when he was neither in memory nor in desire, and thus when there was neither weight nor remorse," Part V, p. 241.

"There were at once looking at each other and avoiding each other's eyes, because they knew that laughter was as sacrilegious here as it is in church when the priest is elevating the host," Part VI, p. 307.

## Key Questions

Perhaps the first consideration with respect to *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is some attention to the unconventionality of the novel's form, its shifting points of focus and modes of narrative. The definition of a "novel," as a distinct mode of narrative different from a book of related short stories, may be a good place to start. As well, the implications of Kundera's novel for issues of sexual mores are inescapable, and deserve careful thought and discussion.

1. Who is the main character of this novel? What is the effect of muting the centrality of a novel's hero or heroine?
2. How is the term "sexual politics" applicable to the situations of the characters in this novel? If their sexuality is politicized, is their politics also eroticized, and how so?
3. What is the significance of Tamina's vision of the children's island? How does this play off our conceptions of innocence, and at what points does a similar notion operate in the story?
4. Can examples of the laughter of the angels be located in contemporary capitalist society, or is this a particularly communist phenomenon? In relation to this, does the untranslatable notion of "litost" apply to our culture as well?
5. Why is Tamina so intent on the retrieval of her dead husband's memorabilia? Is this obsession a mark of sympathetic feeling, or unhealthy dwelling upon a lost past?
6. Does Kundera manage to avoid falling into the extreme skepticism of the devil's laughter, or is that finally his dominant mode of discourse?



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss what the importance of a first introduction or meeting between two people is for Jan. Specifically, explain how Jan and Marketa's relationship is defined based on their first few weeks together, versus how Jan reacts and relates to the woman he meets on the train.

Discuss the importance of love letters in the novel and the drive of the character to have lost love letters returned to him or her.

Why are the true historical events of Prague and the Czech Republic brought up frequently in an otherwise wholly fictional tale? What purpose do they serve?

Why do you believe Kundera inserts himself in the novel as a character "I" and what impact does it have on the novel altogether?

What are the various forms of laughter? Give an example of some extreme cases in the novel.

Explain the ring dance and Tamina's golden ring. How are they connected? What do both rings signify to the characters within the novel?

Describe how Kundera's father's drive to understand the meaning of Beethoven's variations inspires and impacts this novel as a whole.

Why is "litost" so important for the student and his relationships with other characters in the novel?

What is the "border" that Jan is concerned about in the final chapters? Describe how he defines his border and juxtapose it to other everyday repetitions of the characters, including Tamina's everyday passive approach to work, Passer's continual pounding on the table and any other comparable instances.

## Literary Precedents

Milan Kundera finds his literary inspiration among some of the novel's earliest practitioners, such as Francois Rabelais, Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, and Denis Diderot. These early novelists, Kundera feels, were the "greatest experimenters," opening up possibilities in the novel that have since been ignored. Kundera admires these early novelists not only for their freedom of form but also for their humanism. He is especially an admirer of Diderot, who was a philosopher, encyclopedist, playwright, and critic as well as novelist. Above all, Diderot represents the Enlightenment, whose rationalist stance Kundera echoes through his irony, skepticism, and the frequent questions that appear in his work. For his humor Kundera is also indebted to the native Czech tradition, represented most notably by Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*.

## Related Titles

Please see this section in the analysis of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.



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