

READING GROUP GUIDE

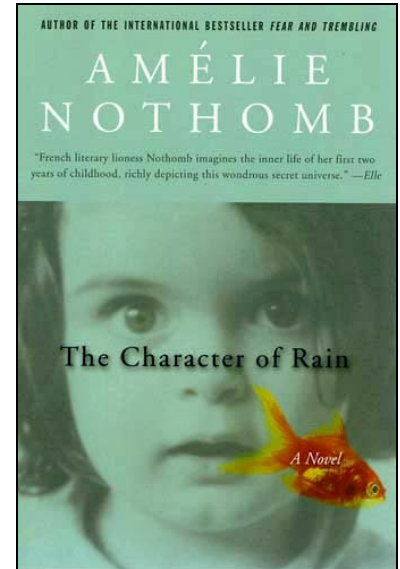
The Character of Rain

by Amelie Nothomb

St. Martin's Press

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Introduction to *The Character of Rain*

The Japanese believe that until the age of three, children, whether Japanese or not, are gods, each one an *okosama*, or "lord child." On their third birthday they fall from grace and join the rest of the human race. In Amelie Nothomb's new novel, *The Character of Rain*, we learn that divinity is a difficult thing from which to recover, particularly if, like the child in this story, you have spent the first two and a half years of life in a nearly vegetative state.

"I remember everything that happened to me after the age of two and one-half," the narrator tells us. She means this literally. Once jolted out of her plant-like, tube-like trance (to the ecstatic relief of her concerned parents), the child bursts into existence, absorbing everything that Japan, where her father works as a diplomat, has to offer. Life is an unfolding pageant of delight and danger, a ceaseless exploration of pleasure and the limits of power. Most wondrous of all is the discovery of water: oceans, seas, pools, puddles, streams, ponds, and, perhaps most of all, rain—one meaning of the Japanese character for her name. Hers is an amphibious life.

The Character of Rain evokes the hilarity, terror, and sanctity of childhood. As she did in the award-winning, international bestseller *Fear and Trembling*, Nothomb grounds the novel in the outlines of her experiences in Japan, but the self-portrait that emerges from these pages is hauntingly universal. Amelie Nothomb's novels are unforgettable immersion experiences, leaving you both holding your breath with admiration, your lungs aching, and longing for more.

Praise for *The Character of Rain*

"Ingenious...With great delicacy, Nothomb updates the age-old divide between East and West in this delectable little book." - *O, The Oprah Magazine*

"Elegantly written...Nothomb demonstrates a shrewd understanding of the intricate ways Japanese relationships are made and spoiled."

- *The New York Times Book Review*

"A polished little satire."

- *The Wall Street Journal*

"Nothomb potently distills from the state of infancy the intensity of beginnings, the precariousness, the trailed clouds of glory...that grow indistinct as childhood approaches."

- Richard Eder, *The New York Times*

"Witty and original. Perhaps the best yet from one of Europe's finest young writers."

- *Kirkus Reviews*

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. The narrator of the novel maintains with great seriousness that she can remember absolutely everything from the age of two. Do you believe this is possible? Do you have any memories of being two, and do they have the same clarity and precision as the memories here?
2. The narrator provides a vivid portrait of a baby's pre-verbal existence – in this case a child's life from birth until the moment she eats that piece of white chocolate given to her by her grandmother. Is she exceptional or is there something universal about her babyhood and the way she remembers it?
3. According to the novel, the Japanese consider children younger than three to be "gods," and spoil them rotten. Does this novel help explain why they feel childhood is holy? Is this true to any degree of our own culture?
4. Water literally courses throughout this book – lakes, rivers, oceans, gutters. The Japanese character for "Amelie" is the same as the character for rain. What is the relationship between water and the story Amelie has to tell?
5. Death is prevalent in this novel – not just death but the experience of dying, described in almost aesthetic terms. Talk about Amelie's near-death experiences and how they shape her vision of the world. Can a three-year-old child experience the kind of angst that would nearly drive her to suicide?
6. Amelie has two nannies, the loving Nishio-san and the hateful Kashima-san. They look at Japan and its relationship to the West in very different ways. Did you find you began to understand Kashima-san, or at least the culture that has shaped her, better by the end of the novel?
7. The novel ends on a rueful, almost mournful note: "After that, nothing more happened." What do you think Amelie, the narrator, or Amelie Nothomb, the writer, means by this last sentence?

About the Author

Belgian by nationality, **Amélie Nothomb** was born in Kobe, Japan, and currently lives in Paris. She is the author of eight novels, translated into fourteen languages, including most recently *Fear and Trembling* which won the Grand Prix of the Académie Française and the Prix Internet du Livre.