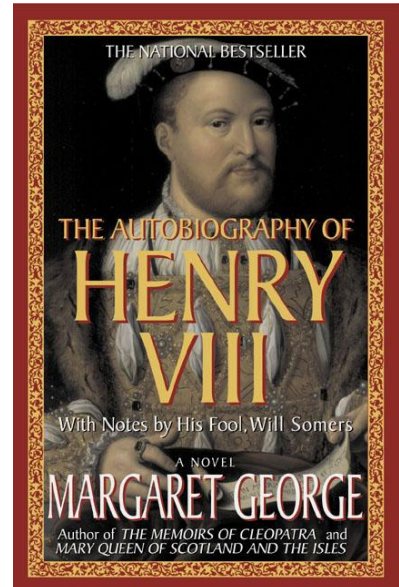


# READING GROUP GUIDE

## The Autobiography of Henry VIII: With Notes by His Fool, Will Somers

By Margaret George



Much has been written about the mighty, egotistical Henry VIII: the man who dismantled the Church because it would not grant him the divorce he wanted; who married six women and beheaded two of them; who executed his friend Thomas More; who sacked the monasteries; who longed for a son and neglected his daughters, Mary and Elizabeth; who finally grew fat, disease-ridden, dissolute. Now, in her magnificent work of storytelling and imagination Margaret George brings us Henry VIII's story as he himself might have told it, in memoirs interspersed with irreverent comments from his jester and confidant, Will Somers. Brilliantly combining history, wit, dramatic narrative, and an extraordinary grasp of the pleasures and perils of power, this monumental novel shows us Henry the man more vividly than he has ever been seen before.



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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Will Somers quotes a common soldier on Henry's talents: "He was a perfect theologian, a good philosopher and a strong man at arms, a jeweler, a perfect builder as well of fortresses as of pleasant palaces, and from one to another there was no necessary kind of knowledge, from a King's degree to a carter's, but he had an honest sight of it." Others might add his musical ability and gift of languages. Do you think all these gifts helped him in ruling, or just set him further apart from others?
2. His sister Mary Tudor asks him, "When did you become so hard?" and Henry tells himself, "It was necessary for a king to be hard—at times." Do you agree that a person in ultimate authority must learn to be hard? Did Henry learn it too well, or too quickly?
3. Contrary to popular image, Henry was not lusty, but rather prudish; and was tormented by his difficulties in producing a male heir. ("Am I not a man like others?" he cried to the Venetian ambassador.) Was Henry on a quest to prove his virility? How might his doubts about his masculinity have affected his nature and behavior?
4. Henry falls violently in love with Anne Boleyn the first time he sees her and before he knows much of anything about her. What do you think of love at first sight? Is such a love possible? Or is it doomed from the outset?
5. Was Henry mentally unstable, if not outright "mad"? How did having such absolute power influence him for the worse?
6. Was Thomas More destined to be a martyr? "His lover is pain, disguised as Christ," Henry says. "And he will wed her, with my executioner officiating as priest." How much was Henry's doing and how much was More's seeking of it?
7. "Lastly, I make this vow, that mine eyes desire you above all things." Katherine of Aragon's deathbed letter to Henry clearly indicates that she still loved him. Does that mean that the young Henry was lovable, and Katherine unable to see the older one? Or does it prove the Shakespeare quote, "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds"?



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8. Henry thought he truly loved Jane Seymour, that she restored him to wholeness. Do you believe that an uncorrupted presence had the power to heal Henry at this point, or did Jane

simply die so soon that he was spared any disillusionment with her? What might have happened had she lived?

9. Henry has carried into posterity the reputation of vicious destruction, unbounded appetites, cruel rapaciousness. Here he explains it as a rebellion against God for taking Jane away: “I took a savage pleasure in all these nasty acts. Yet none was nasty enough, none affronted God enough.” To what extent does this emotional reaction account for Henry’s “Nero” period?

10. Henry cries, “I am not to be like other men! A King is different—that is what it all rests on.” The idea of the divine rights of kings was gaining ground, and it put enormous pressure on Henry to pretend to be without human weaknesses. In what ways did the mask of kingly perfection help Henry—or hurt him?

11. When you read the Catherine Howard episode, what did you feel for Henry? Embarrassment? Pain? That it served him right? What did you feel for Catherine?

12. After Catherine’s death, Henry says, “I was alone, unloved, as I had been all my life.” Is this true? Or just self-pity? Was there anyone besides Katherine of Aragon who truly loved him?

13. Henry “longed for the lost world he had helped destroy.” Henry was born into the late Middle Ages but brought his kingdom into the Renaissance. In the process he destroyed the ordered Old World of the medieval church and village and set forces in motion that he ultimately could not control. On his deathbed, would he be proud, or ashamed, of what he had accomplished?

