

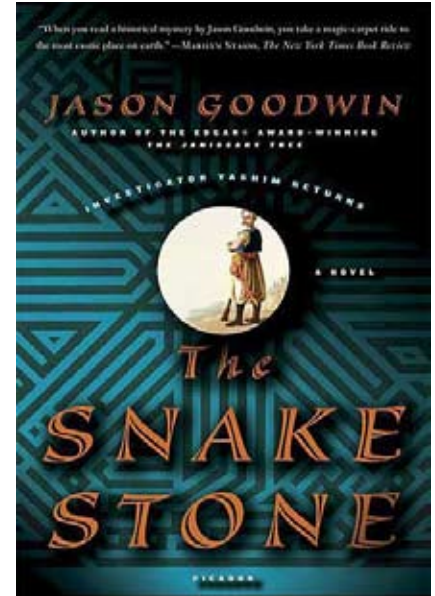


# Reading Group Gold

## The Snake Stone

A Novel

by Jason Goodwin



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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Snake Stone* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Snake Stone*.

### About the Book

Winner of the 2007 Edgar Award for Best Novel, Jason Goodwin's second novel proves to be just as compelling and complex as his first, *The Janissary Tree*. The return of investigator Yashim brings us back to 1830's Istanbul—a time when the ailing Sultan is actively trying to Westernize the nation and his subjects are hanging onto their old traditions and loyalties. In this uncertain environment, Yashim searches for a friend's attacker, becomes a murder suspect in a case he believes is related, and ends up part of a centuries-old quest, linked to the history of Istanbul itself.

Throughout the novel, the Yashim stalks Istanbul's many neighborhoods, its grand palaces, and its ancient waterways—and his status as a eunuch allows him to walk among every strata of society, from sultans to shopkeepers. The novel offers much to discuss about the character of Istanbul, its unlikely detective, and how truth and myth mingle through the course of history.

### About the Author

Jason Goodwin is the author of *Lords of the Horizons: A History of the Ottoman Empire*, among other award-winning nonfiction. *The Janissary Tree*, his first novel and the first in a series featuring Yashim, was published in May 2006 to international acclaim.

### Discussion Questions



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1. Yashim has a special place in Istanbul because he is a eunuch. He is a “listener”, a “protector” and “not entirely a man”. He has access to Topkapi Palace, reaching levels as high as the Valide, the Sultan’s mother, but is also comfortable with farmers and money lenders. How else does Yashim’s station help him in his investigation? How does it affect his relationships and his interactions with others?
2. In *The Snake Stone*, there are many characters, and the city of Istanbul itself may be considered one of them. Early in the novel, LeFevre gives a brief history of the city, as well as an introduction to some of its many names: Byzantium, Constantinople, and Istanbul. How does the character of Istanbul shape and influence the story? Can you think of other cities you’ve visited whose long history continues to shape them today?
3. On a similar note, Istanbul and the Ottomans were always at the crossroads of East and West. This continues in modern day Turkey where the traditional and Islamic are constantly battling with more secular, Western lifestyles. How does Goodwin address this tension in the novel?
4. One point that Goodwin mentions repeatedly is the Sultan’s focus on bringing Western dress to Istanbul, in particular, the change from the turban to the Fez. Yashim, however, prefers to wear a turban. His friend George—the market vendor whose beating begins the novel—also wears his own traditional dress: the “brimless, blue cap and black slippers that defined him as a Greek.” Discuss how the characters’ clothes do more than define their place in society – do they also move the story forward in some way?
5. One of the most interesting aspects of *The Snake Stone* is the way the author gives a full picture of the city and all its varied ethnic groups. For example, the main focus of Yashim’s investigations through much of the novel is the Hetira. Discuss how this cultural diversion brings tension to the story.
6. Although we primarily see the story through Yashim’s eyes, Goodwin also gives us a taste of what’s happening outside his range of vision. Often, these events are happening simultaneously. The most interesting example of this is when Amelie LaFevre is trying to get into Aya Sofia and Yashim is moving through the water tunnels looking for Xani’s body. What does this kind of storytelling do for the novel? Does it heighten the suspense for the readers to know what Yashim does not?
7. As a Pole, Stanislaw Palewski is distinctly an outsider in Istanbul and a very good friend to Yashim. Does he give a perspective to the investigation that the characters native to Istanbul cannot? Or is his importance in the story more closely related to what is hidden in his cupboard?
8. Food and cooking play a big part in Yashim’s life and in this novel. Why do you think the author would choose to write about Yashim’s cooking in such fine detail?
9. Yashim also says that the Ottomans had been perfecting the subtleties of flavor and spices centuries earlier while Europeans were still eating meat off the bone with their fingers. Do Turkish and Middle Eastern food still reflect this today? Does an American hamburger or an English roast beef seem more appealing to you than one of Yashim’s carefully crafted dolma?
10. Yashim is not a detective by trade, rather, he is forced to find Max LeFevre’s killer to prevent himself



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from being named as such. Does this give Yashim's search greater urgency than if he were a hired detective or a government official? How would the story have been different if he was?

11. The "snake stone" of the title literally refers to the Medusa statue hidden in Istanbul's water tunnels, and eventually links the watermen's guild to the protection of the relics that LeFevre and others are searching for. Can you see other, more subtle references and allusions implied by the title?

12. In the beginning of the book, Max LeFevre tells Yashim and Palewski that he believes everything he reads in books. The Gyllius— the book Max LeFevre leaves in Yashim's apartment—is what leads him and his wife Amelie to believe that there is hiding place under Aya Sofia. There is a thread about myth and reality in this novel which is illustrated in the example of the Gyllius. Even after Yashim pieces together the mystery of the relics, the watermen, and the serpent heads, the valide reminds him, and the reader, that one should never believe everything they read. How do the history and myths of Istanbul help deliver this cliché-turned-lesson in this novel?