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Reading Group Gold

The Book of My Lives

by Aleksandar Hemon

About the Book

Aleksandar Hemon's lives begin in Sarajevo, where boyhood is consumed by street soccer, resentment of little sisters, and family dinners; and a young man's life lasers the status quo with American music, bad poetry, and slightly better journalism. At the age of twenty-seven, as war's inevitability closed in on his bright city, Hemon left for the United States—unaware that this trip would mark the beginning of another life. Unable to return to Sarajevo, he watched from Chicago, as his city came under siege; waited as his parents and sister, and the family dog, fled; and reluctantly began to build a new life for himself with his own family in this new city.

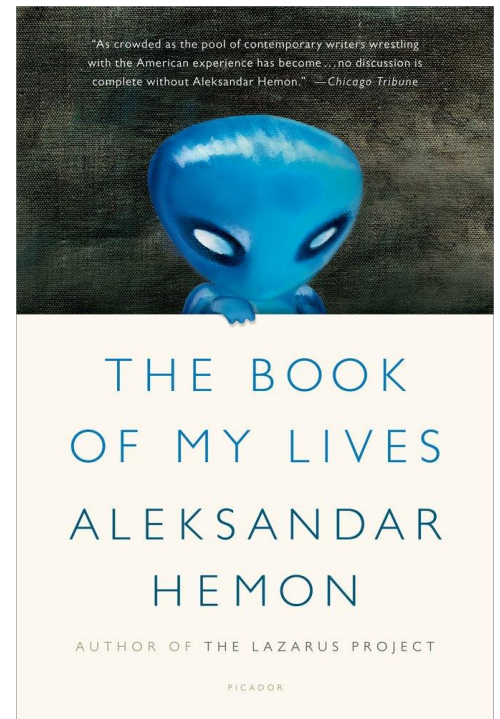
At once a love song to two cities and a paean to the bonds of family, *The Book of My Lives* is a singular work of passion, built on fierce intelligence, unspeakable tragedies, and sharp insight. Like the best narratives, it is a book that will leave you a different reader when you finish—and a different person, with a new way of looking at the world.

About the Author

Aleksandar Hemon is the author of *The Question of Bruno*, *Nowhere Man*, *The Lazarus Project*, and *Love and Obstacles*. He has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a “genius grant” from the MacArthur Foundation, the Jan Michalski Prize for Literature, the PEN/W. G. Sebald Award, and, most recently, a 2012 USA Fellowship. He lives in Chicago.

Discussion Questions

- 1) While these essays were originally written as distinct, independent pieces, they speak to “one another like filaments of memory” (*Los Angeles Times*), converging in ways—unexpected and beautiful—that present a whole story, if not a whole life exactly. Discuss how the essays work in concert with one another. How, for example, do “Life During Wartime” and “Dog Lives” work together to give readers a sense of life in Sarajevo in 1991 and 1992? How does the book work as a whole? Did you feel the author's transformation over time?
- 2) Through his confession to attempted soricide when he was four and a half years old Hemon describes his relationship to himself, his sister, his family and, on some level, the world at large. Why do you think Hemon begins the book with this memory? What do you think of this opening in light of the end of the book? How does his relationship to the world evolve over the course of the book?
- 3) This is Aleksandar Hemon's first book of nonfiction. What are the similarities and differences between his fiction and nonfiction? Do you see a relationship between some of the essays and his novels and stories? Which of his life events seem to have inspired Hemon's fiction?



Reading group guide written by Alexis Gargagliano

- 4) In his acknowledgments Hemon claims, “I write fiction because I cannot not do it, but I have to be pressed into writing nonfiction.” Why do you think nonfiction is harder for him to write? Do you think of *The Book of My Lives* as a memoir or a collection of essays?
- 5) Discuss the significance of the title *The Book of My Lives*. What are the various lives that Hemon has lived? Why do you think the book’s title was drawn from the essay “The Book of My Life”?
- 6) What effect did Professor Koljevic, the literature professor who was a powerful member of the Serbian Democratic Party, have on Hemon’s relationship to literature? What about his relationship with language—how does it evolve from the time when he was a young journalist in Sarajevo, recording the story of his friend who was tortured, to when he is a father, talking to his oldest daughter about the devastating illness of his youngest daughter?
- 7) Hemon endures incredible tragedies, and through his writing, we are made privy to his experiences. To what degree to language enable you to empathize with tragedy? In what ways does it allow Hemon to overcome his experiences? Or is that even possible?
- 8) Why do you think Hemon chooses to write in a language that isn’t his native tongue?
- 9) Hemon is constantly negotiating the tension between his inner and outer lives. Give some examples.
- 10) One of the central themes of *The Book of My Lives* is Hemon’s connection (or disconnection) to place. Discuss how Hemon’s identity and self-perception are rooted geographically? What does it mean to be from Yugoslavia? To be Bosnian? How do these identities and labels change with the shifting political landscape and what does that mean on a personal level? What is the significance of the story he tells in “The Lives of Others” about saying to his friend Almir, “So you are a Turk!”?
- 11) Describe Hemon’s relationship to Sarajevo before he moved to America and after, when he returns only as “an irreversibly displaced visitor.”
- 12) Why is Hemon so drawn to his friend Peter the Assyrian? How does life as an exile shape them and inform their relationship?
- 13) In “Sound and Vision,” “The Magic Mountain,” and “The Lives of a Flaneur,” we travel with Hemon as he traverses different landscapes on foot. How does walking help the author connect to a place?
- 14) In his essay, “Reasons Why I Do Not Wish to Leave Chicago” Hemon limns the many things he loves about his second city, from the ice on the lake to a particular view of the skyline. Why do you think Hemon feels so strongly about Chicago, and how do his feelings for his adoptive city differ from his feelings for Sarajevo? Do you think he romanticizes cities? If so, why?

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