

PICADOR

# Reading Group Gold

## *The Mark and the Void:*

### *A Novel*

By Paul Murray

#### ABOUT THE BOOK

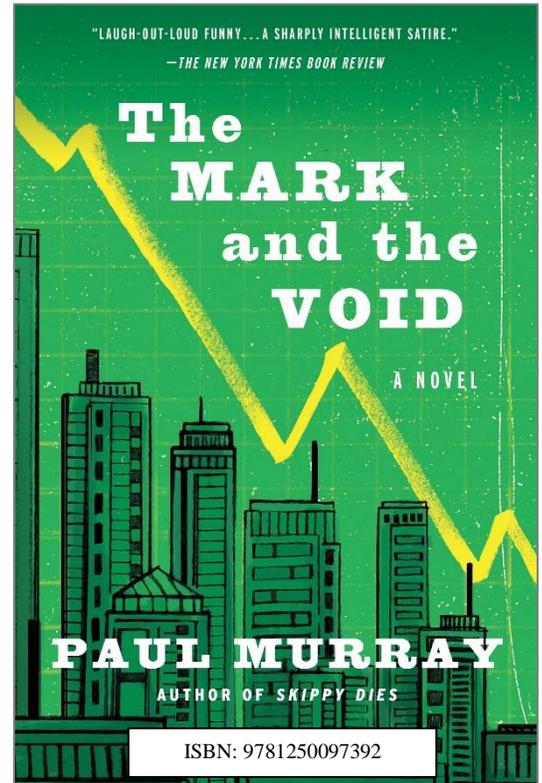
**A madcap novel of institutional folly, following the success of Paul Murray's wildly original breakout hit, *Skippy Dies***

Meet Claude: an investment bank drone longing for something more meaningful. Marooned in soggy Dublin, he yearns for art, philosophy, and a steady girlfriend. You could call him a modern-day everyman—or just another lonely banker.

Now meet Paul: struggling novelist, strip club enthusiast, pioneer of not-entirely-legal Internet start-ups. He is willing to stoop to any level in pursuit of the riches he knows he deserves. You could call him a troubled genius—or a shameless crook.

Both men have something missing in their lives. They might just be able to help each other out of a big hole. Or their friendship might be the most disastrous thing to hit Dublin since the banking crisis. As Paul's get-rich-quick schemes blow up in his face and the global economy falters, will Claude be able to save the day, get the girl, and finally become the hero of his own story?

Probably the funniest novel ever written about the recent financial crisis, *The Mark and the Void* is a stirring examination of the deceptions carried out in the names of art and commerce.



## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. At the outset of the novel, Paul is interested in capturing the essence of “the Everyman.” How would you define “the Everyman?” In what ways do you think Claude embodies this persona? In what ways does he not?
2. When discussing the nature of stories, Ish and Claude disagree about one fundamental element. Claude says, “There are plenty of good stories without love,” but Ish disagrees, asserting, “every story needs love.” What do you think?
3. After observing the day-to-day life of Claude and his colleagues at BOT, Paul says, “Ultimately it has to be about money, right? But I don’t . . . I don’t *see* anything. You do all these deals, you get paid all these fees, and it’s all just . . .’ He makes a *poof!* Gesture with his hands.” What broader implications might this passage have on the state of Ireland’s financial situation? Can you draw any parallels between how the banking industry is reflected here and the crafting of fiction?
4. After Claude realizes that Paul’s novel is a hoax, he remains intrigued by the story Paul proposed, particularly the love story with Ariadne. Claude asks Paul if he’ll “help . . . plot that story” to “put your book into my life.” Do you think it’s possible to predetermine, or plot, aspects of real life? How so?
5. In the opening of Part 3, the narrator notes, “Humans have always used stories to order reality. Now, however, technology allows unprecedented quantities of reality to be turned into story. Reality thereby becomes secondary.” Do you agree with this view? Why or why not? In what ways does *The Mark and the Void* make you examine your notions of “fiction” and “reality?”
6. Though a painter, Ariadne forms a rather cynical view of art. While looking at a sculpture, she says to Claude, “So from a terrible thing that really happened, on this spot, we get, a hundred and how many years later, a piece of art, very beautiful, that people can look at as they hurry by with their takeaway lattes...” What are your reactions to Ariadne’s perspective on art? How would you describe the role of art in modern society?

7. The philosophical notion of the simulacrum, “a bad copy or false image of something,” comes up throughout the novel. Ariadne even titles one of her works *Simulacrum 18*. Why do you think Ariadne is particularly interested in this idea? Do you think her perspective on the world changes Claude’s in any way? How so?
8. Claude had a fraught relationship with his father who worked as a blacksmith and believed their family’s “poverty was proof of our rectitude, a sign that we were the good guys that those in control wanted to crush.” Yet, he wanted Claude to go to college and wouldn’t allow him to become a blacksmith asserting, “The family could only afford one piss artist.” Claude finds his father’s beliefs and expectations contradictory. Do you agree? Why or why not?
9. The following quote opens Part 2: “Life is something so hideous that the only way to endure it is to escape it. And one escapes by living in art” (Gustave Flaubert). Put yourself in the characters’ positions for a moment. How do you think Claude would respond to this quote? How about Ariadne? Paul?
10. The novel’s title, *The Mark and the Void*, refers to a work of art by a fictional philosopher named Francois Texier. The painting is composed of pages of text superimposed upon one another, supposedly the pages of his unfinished book. Why might this work of art be called *The Mark and the Void*? In what ways does this title represent the ideas in the broader novel?
11. Even after Claude realizes that Paul’s plan to write a novel about him, the “Everyman,” is a ruse, Claude pressures him to write a new book. He’s adamant throughout the novel. Why do you think Claude feels it’s so important for Paul to continue with his writing?
12. When describing Myhotswaitress.com to Claude, Paul says, “Why don’t we read novels anymore? Because thanks to technology, we can turn our own lives into stories. Each of us can be the hero of our own movie.” Do you think there’s some truth to this viewpoint? Describe why you agree or disagree.
13. When he first meets Claude, Paul says he’s been struggling with some elemental questions in his writing, such as “what’s the novel *for*, what place does it have in the modern world?” Likewise, the author seems to be toying with this question throughout the whole book. After reading, what role do you think *The Mark and the Void* serves in the modern world?

Guide written by Laura Chasen

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